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Suffering Saint, Asexual Victorian Woman, Or Queer Icon? Cinematic Representations of Eleanor Roosevelt

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Suffering Saint, Asexual Victorian Woman, 
Or Queer Icon?

Cinematic Representations of Eleanor Roosevelt

By

Angela Beauchamp

FINAL PROJECT SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF 
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Advisors:  Thomas Lewis and Nina Fonoroff
Suffering Saint, Asexual Victorian Woman, or Queer Icon? Cinematic Representations of Eleanor Roosevelt

Skidmore College MALS Thesis

Angela Beauchamp
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*Figure 1 Eleanor Roosevelt signing in on “What’s My Line?” (1953)*

https://vimeo.com/125002819
Abstract
This critical discourse analysis examines representations of Eleanor Roosevelt in a wide range of biographical, docudrama, and documentary film and television from 1945 to 2014. By focusing on the figure known by many as the most important woman of the twentieth century, and one who appears as a character or subject in over eighty movies and television programs, I investigate recurring discourses around heteronormativity and cultural constructions of gender and sexuality for American women over time. These filmic portrayals reveal attempts to normalize Eleanor’s life, framing her accomplishments and motivations through lenses of marriage and family, or they “queer” Eleanor’s legacy by calling attention to difference. This includes themes that create an image of a lonely woman who must find fulfilment outside of a failed marriage, an asexual Victorian persona, or more recently, a very independent woman with a personal life outside of home and family. Today’s Eleanor is not merely an extension of her husband, the eyes and ears of the President of the United States, nor his jilted wife, or even a saint.

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Introduction

On inaugural eve 1933, Eleanor Roosevelt and Associated Press reporter Lorena Hickok convened in a bathroom on the train from New York to Washington, the only place where they could find enough privacy to conduct an exclusive interview introducing the new First Lady to the nation. The next day, Americans read about Eleanor’s role as President Franklin Roosevelt’s “eyes and ears,” explaining her wide range of activities in light of a husband with limited mobility. Thus, the savvy Roosevelt political team, of which “Hick” was a crucial member, preempted some of the criticism of an activist Eleanor by couching everything she did in terms of an extension of FDR and merely a wife and helpmate, not a woman with ambitions of her own. The country now marvels that the ordinary person did not know that polio-stricken Franklin could not walk, but this was not the only illusion engineered by the Roosevelts. Eleanor, a woman whose marriage was a complicated façade, characterized herself in heteronormative terms, allowing her to participate in what was largely a man’s world of public policy. This persona became so widely accepted that as film and television assumed the role of the dominant means of storytelling, biographical films, docudramas, and documentaries all replicated the image repeatedly without interrogation. Eleanor Roosevelt, known by many as the most important woman of the twentieth century as she expanded the public’s idea of what a woman could be, appears as a character or subject of over eighty movies and television programs, from Great Day (1945) to The Roosevelts: An Intimate History (2014). Yet despite her appropriation by the feminist movement and a “post-feminist” era when women are much more prevalent in the public arena, most of these portrayals continue to frame her in terms of marriage and family—interpreting her motivations, ambitions, and accomplishments through the lenses of stereotypical gender roles and sexuality. Representations of “the most liberated woman of this century,” as noted historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. called her in 1971 (Foreword, xiii), are often
undercut by ongoing discourses that place her contributions in the framework of wife and mother. In addition, although her sexual identity would become a matter of public interest after her death, Roosevelt’s image in popular culture fell outside the normative long before these revelations and questions became widely known. Portrayals seek to either normalize her within expected patterns of family life and a woman’s place within heteropatriarchal structures, even as a feminist icon; or they “queer” Eleanor by calling attention to difference, in both positive ways by celebrating her rather non-traditional legacy, or in negative ways, as the canonical *Eleanor and Franklin* (1976) did by creating a long-lasting public image of a sad and lonely woman whose existence is outlined by her husband’s rejection and a need to find fulfilment outside of a failed marriage.

This study is a critical discourse analysis of a broad selection of films and television programs featuring Eleanor (alternately called “ER,” as she signed her letters), located in the context of contemporary cultural and political movements and events. This includes fictional biographical films and docudramas that become a part of public history and audience understandings of people and events from the past, and documentaries cast as non-fiction, but involving many of the same themes as their fictional counterparts. These constructions of a life also reflect the time of the film’s production and the contemporary cultural context. As cultural texts, biographical films about women tell us about assumptions or tensions around gender roles and expectations in a given time period, and few American women rival Eleanor Roosevelt in the number of films in which she appears as a character or documentary subject. The loving wife in *Sunrise at Campobello* (1960), the suffering saint of *Eleanor and Franklin* (1976), the asexual Victorian woman in *Biography* “Eleanor Roosevelt: A Restless Spirit” (1994), and the queered Eleanor of *Hyde Park on Hudson* (2012) all indicate how adjustments in public memory of this
historical figure coincide with recurring discourses around heteronormativity, feminism, and the problems presented by women in the public sphere.


Looking at historical responses also contributes to a greater understanding of cultural attitudes and the ways that they shift over time. Thus, I will consider the scholarly, critical, and public reception to the films’ messages around gender and sexuality at the time of release. The analysis is not about a “correct” reading of these works, but a range of possible readings at
historical junctures. Contemporary reviews and letters to the editor from newspapers and journals, as well as posts on internet forums and blogs, serve as primary sources and a reflection of critical and popular reception. Archival still and moving images of Eleanor Roosevelt are also central background material, as are her own autobiographies, columns, and letters, to determine how Eleanor presented her own image to the world over the years and how others projected and interpreted those images. Key biographies include *Eleanor and Franklin* by Joseph Lash (1971) and *Eleanor Roosevelt* by Blanche Wiesen Cook (Volume 1, 1992; Volume 2, 1999), as well as many other collections and reflections, including those of her sons James and Elliot. Secondary scholarly work references the biographical and documentary film genres, women’s history in the United States, and additional feminist, queer, and post-colonial scholarship. Feminist and queer film theories frame my approach to the source materials and to the analyses of reception, genre, and critical discourses.

Although Eleanor has been so present in the American cinematic landscape and the subject of hundreds of books, few have written about her on-screen representation. Only Dana L. Cloud in a chapter in *Queering Public Address: Sexualities in American Historical Discourse* (2007) addresses how two documentaries approach Eleanor’s sexuality. The subject of the biographical film in general has been one that has received little scholarly attention, and the two canonical scholars of biographical film, George Custen and Dennis Bingham, do not adequately examine how the genre’s treatment of women differs from that of men. Discussions of the documentary and questions around ideologies and its constructed nature are, on the other hand, very active. What these films will show is that discourses around gender and sexuality in historical biographical film match those of documentaries from the same period quite closely.
Why Eleanor? For decades, her contributions as an activist, humanitarian, and politician stood out as bold and unexpected for a woman. Her detractors, and there were many, also called attention to Eleanor’s intrusion into the world of men with cartoons and editorials. She has been called “the first lady of liberalism,” a civil rights, worker’s rights, and women’s rights advocate, champion of the poor, peace activist, and primary author of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In short, she was a new model for what women could be across the nation in the 1930s through her death in 1962, before which she chaired the first Presidential Commission on the Status of Women. Yet some have also criticized her for advocating a civil rights movement that slowly operated within the system, ineffective opposition to Japanese-American internment during WWII, or working to get Jews out of Europe, but only behind the scenes and without public recognition of the issue. Only twenty-four percent of American women earned wages in 1930, most in the lowest paid, lowest status positions, and cultural attitudes that generally looked disdainfully on women employed outside the home intensified during the Depression years, when the number of women elected to public office also declined from 1920s levels (Ware 21-23, 95). It is in this atmosphere that confined women largely to their homes that Eleanor Roosevelt entered with daily newspaper columns, political radio shows, and appearances in the newsreels that ran before films in the theater. When the only women in the public eye were entertainers, she participated in a man’s world, and sought and received unprecedented press coverage for women of the time.

Defining Herself and Being Defined

To analyze how others have interpreted and presented Eleanor’s story on screen, one must begin with how she herself constructed an image for the public—for it is often in her own
words that we find the basis of stories that are repeated by others in print and on film, without question. Eleanor wrote seventeen books and over 8500 columns and articles, held regular press conferences in the White House (for women reporters only), hosted a regular radio show, and in her later years, moderated a political panel television show. She was prolific, to say the least, and the years in the public eye produced an enormous volume of newsreels, press reports, cartoons, editorials, still photos, and more. It would be accurate to say that Eleanor used her position as wife of the President of the United States to advance the causes and issues in which she believed, both directly by influencing the President and his staff, and by addressing the issues herself and garnering press coverage. This gave her a national and significantly international platform, but how she positioned herself shows additional political shrewdness.

In a very quick review of her oft-repeated life story, Eleanor Roosevelt was born in 1884 into a New York patrician family, the niece of President Theodore Roosevelt. Her father was an alcoholic; her mother, the beautiful Anna Hall Roosevelt, was disappointed that Eleanor was an ordinary looking child, and as an adult, Eleanor often noted that Anna thought her ugly. Her mother died when ER was eight, and father Elliott Roosevelt died when she was ten. The orphan went to live with her strict Grandmother Hall, and overall she led a very lonely existence as a girl. The life-changing move was to send Eleanor to school at Allenswood in England at age fourteen, where she studied with Madame Souvestre and was the recipient of a worldly, liberal education. Grandmother Hall insisted that Eleanor return home at age eighteen to come out in society, rather than continue her education. ER then volunteered in a New York City tenement house, opening her eyes in new ways to poverty, immigration, and child labor issues. She began seeing distant cousin FDR at age nineteen, and against the wishes of Franklin’s controlling mother, Sara Delano Roosevelt, the two were soon married and produced six children, one of
whom died in infancy. Childbirth and motherhood took up much of her life during this period, and they all lived with Sara, who was largely in charge of the household and decision-making. The couple moved to Washington, DC when the Wilson administration appointed Franklin Assistant Secretary of the Navy. It is during this time during WWI that he had an affair with ER’s social secretary, Lucy Mercer. Eleanor offered him a divorce, but they agreed to stay married for political and financial reasons, never again sharing intimacies. The family moved back to New York, where Franklin worked as a lawyer and Eleanor began writing and political activities. He unsuccessfully ran as a vice-presidential candidate with James Cox and then contracted polio in 1921. After several years of recovery, he became Governor of New York and won the first presidential election in 1932.

The staple story that Eleanor was FDR’s “eyes and legs” or “eyes and ears” as a service to the nation when he could not easily travel was repeated by the Roosevelt camp and served as an explanation for her busy schedule to a variety of locales. This justification allowed many of ER’s activities to go without heavy criticism, since she seen as merely serving as an extension of FDR. Clues found within her own writing reveal that it was not this simple, but it was one way to avoid some of the scathing ridicule that other women, single or married, endured. For example, in the 1920s the story goes that Eleanor became active with the Democratic Women of New York as a means to keep the Roosevelt name alive while Franklin recovered from polio. FDR’s right-hand-man Louis Howe taught her public speaking skills, and even though she was terrified in the beginning, she became a well-known speaker in New York as a handmaiden to FDR’s political ambitions. However, ER’s autobiography notes that she began working with Esther Lape, Elizabeth Read, and the League of Women Voters before Franklin’s polio (112). Eleanor’s writing also tells us, “When the last child went to boarding school, I began to want to do things
on my own, to use my own mind and abilities for my own aims” (279). This time period coincides with FDR’s years privately convalescing, but reveals different interests and motivations behind the façade of devoted public servant who would have been at home had her husband not required her assistance. She edited the “Women’s Democratic News” and worked for seventeen different organizations, including serving on the boards of the Women’s Trade Union League, the International Ladies Garment Workers Union, and the National Consumers Union. This was full-time work, not a simple PR campaign in FDR’s name. The woman who did the bidding of a husband with limited mobility was likely a public relations invention in a time when women with ambition and drive of their own were not well accepted in the public sphere. Partners Lape and Read were crucial to ER’s political development in the early 1920s, as were partners Nancy Cook and Marion Dickerman in the late 1920s, and Lorena Hickok in the early 1930s. These were women-identified-women, close friends and mentors who shaped the social life and reformist political agenda of ER, influences she would carry with her from New York to Washington, DC; Eleanor’s friends, however, were also part of the larger Roosevelt team that used the image of a conventional married woman to bring issues to a larger public in ways that her “single” friends could not. Although she was making money with her articles, columns, appearances, and radio shows, and her writing reveals that economic self-sufficiency was of paramount importance to ER, she pitched these efforts as a wife who was reluctant to burden her husband by asking for money for presents and charitable giving. Eleanor’s activities carefully avoided “career” implications, couching it all in the traditional role of helpmate and do-gooder— despite the fact that she also presented a new model of a very independent woman, one who brought in more money than her husband did during the first year of his presidency.
Eleanor Roosevelt does not mention FDR’s WWI era affair with Lucy Mercer in any of her own writing; yet this event, examined at length on-screen, would become the primary motivator as interpreted by many biographers and filmmakers. Her life, so different from most married women of her times, is often rationalized as a reaction to her husband’s philandering, defining her as jilted wife who must find fulfillment outside the home. Other interpretations include her assumed frigidity as a “Victorian woman,” thus excusing FDR’s transgressions, allowing her to move into a saintly, chaste position in society. The release of the correspondence with Hickok, Eleanor’s intimate friend and possible lover, and the two-volume biography by Blanche Wiesen Cook, change the tone of some later portrayals to give Eleanor more agency as a woman with ambitions and desires of her own, not defined by her marriage or any aspect of her marital state. Those critical friendships in the 1920s with other women, for example, show ER as a person who built a life quite separate from her husband and children, a socially radical move. Yet it is FDR who paid to build a “shack in the woods” for Eleanor and her “she-men” friends, the home in which ER would live until her death in 1962, not in the “big house” with the rest of her family. Her public life would never acknowledge the arrangements that were far beyond the normative and a marriage that son James calls, “an armed truce that endured to the day [FDR] died” (101). James also refers to “their long and successful marital partnership” (63), an indication that both participated in and received the benefits of marriage in the public eye, regardless of how it privately looked little like the American heteropatriarchal ideal.

There is no doubt that the press called her unflattering names, caricatured her buck teeth and were generally very “ugly” themselves in what they said about Eleanor. However, ER herself tells a story of her mother being “troubled by my lack of beauty” as a young girl (6). She actually promotes the idea that she had been ugly all her life, despite some very conventionally
beautiful photographs as a young woman and bride and rather elegant inaugural ball photos featuring her sparkling eyes as an older woman. The press and other politicians took her more seriously because of this “ugliness,” as it placed her somewhat outside the category of conventional “woman” seen and not heard. Because they did not often sexualize her or make her an object of men’s sexual desire, this allowed her to move into a more liminal category of the matron who commanded a level of respect, while at the same time, marriage provided a non-threatening cover for her activities. Thus, Eleanor is “queered,” categorized outside of the heteronormative wife and mother role, because she does not fit in with standard constructions of beauty and male desire, chaste because of her husband’s assumed infirmities while still enjoying the privilege of heterosexual marriage. In her autobiography, she confesses to a lack of skill and interest in mothering and leaving much of it to nurses and her mother-in-law, which also moves her outside of the normative ideals of the nuclear family and a woman’s place within it. It is her “ugly” otherness long before knowledge of the loving letters to Hick, which plays a critical role in making the public Eleanor Roosevelt. However, it is also Hick, defined as a lesbian by historians, who helped to construct ER’s image in the early 1930s. The top female reporter for the Associated Press, Lorena Hickok received an assignment to cover Eleanor during the first presidential campaign, and the two became very close—so close that Hick began clearing her stories with the Roosevelt camp before publication. Journalism historian Maureen Beasley credits Hickok with a critical role in crafting what the public was to know about their new First Lady and explains, “She was able to translate Mrs. Roosevelt’s complex personal aspirations into an acceptable public image during the pivotal preinaugural period” (36). Hickok planned ER’s White House press conferences for female reporters only at a time when the administration did not allow women in FDR’s press conferences, and newspapers largely consigned women to
writing society columns. The resulting new jobs for female reporters in Washington gave
Eleanor steady support from this group of newspaperwomen even after the White House years.
No longer able to feign impartiality, Hick resigned from her job with the AP and began working
in the New Deal under Harry Hopkins, traveling the country and reporting on Depression
conditions. She would live in the White House for several years in the bedroom across the hall
from Eleanor’s and remain a lifelong friend.

The biographical films and television programs dissected below reflect a range of ER’s
own self-aware creation for the public, the interpretations of friends and family members,
specific focuses that wish to engage audiences in issues important to the time, and words and
images from those who challenge the portrayals of the past. Eleanor was part of a team of
political image-makers that dominated American public life, and after her years as First Lady,
she continued on an international stage, including becoming a founding delegate to the United
Nations. She found ways to exploit the public’s understandings of the proper role of a married
woman at a time when the media did not contradict this with behind the scenes information. The
public face that everything she did was to help others belies the power gathered to wield such
great influence on a variety of men, institutions, organizations, political parties, and
governments. As American society has changed its understandings of gender, and as historians
have uncovered more information about the life behind the curtain, on-screen Eleanor retains
earlier conventions, while also reflecting the production era of each biography. As cultural
studies pioneer Stuart Hall illustrated many years ago, popular culture is often the place in which
cultural tensions play out, reinforcing hegemonic cultural patterns, while resistance also appears.
Eleanor Roosevelt became a feminist icon in the 1970s, yet the new crop of feminist biographers
who identify the tropes of women’s autobiography and biography did not write her life on film at
the time. Instead, screenwriters used research materials that place ER in a normative world defined by marriage and family. Although she may become angry and rebel, marriage often controls her emotional and political life. Blanche Wiesen Cook’s politically charged biographies suggest that Eleanor Roosevelt created a separate, fulfilling, intimately rich life that was neither lonely nor saintly. Yet only more recently do we see filmmakers with a worldview that challenges the heteropatriarchal nuclear family ideals as they relate to ER’s life. The recent focus of queer theory has examined how individuals and groups defined by difference may stray from the heteronormative, transgressing “natural” and “normal” gender, sexuality, sex, class, race, ethnicity, and citizenship. This also includes ideals of family structure that shape hegemonic societal expectations and constraints. Portrayals of Eleanor Roosevelt often confine her into normative boxes, while some of the most well-known productions actively queer her, positing her difference from other American women of her age, race, and class. Here “queer” refers to not only sexuality, but also definitions as “other” in terms of her mothering skills, lack of a fulfilling marriage or interest in sex with her husband, and crossing racial divides.

Early Moving Images

In the 1930s and ‘40s Movietone footage of Eleanor, she is most often treated as the wife of the President arriving home from a trip, accompanying him during official ceremonies and election events, or launching ships in very brief clips with little dialogue. It is not until the advent of television in the 1950s that we are able to get a better glimpse of ER in moving pictures, and here we find her between identities as FDR’s wife and a political power of her own. Eleanor Roosevelt, the international political expert, hosted a weekly NBC show on Sunday afternoons in 1950, Today with Mrs. Roosevelt. The narrator tells the viewer, “Mrs. Franklin D. Roosevelt
cordially invites you to take tea with her again today in the Colonial Room of the Park Sheraton Hotel in New York City” before she interviews guests like the Prime Minister of Pakistan or tackles subjects like the American role in Germany. From 1959 to 1962, she moderated a monthly program on National Educational Television (the precursor to PBS) called *Prospects of Mankind*. There she discussed current issues with the likes of President John F. Kennedy on the Peace Corps, disagreeing with him occasionally, and others like Henry Kissinger, Bertrand Russell, Tanzanian President Julius Nyerere, and Adlai Stevenson. On the *Longines Chronoscope* show in 1953, two men interview her as an expert on foreign affairs, treating her with respect and authority. After addressing attitudes of other countries towards the US and an appraisal of the United Nations, they ask a question about what it means to be liberal. “Mrs. Roosevelt, you have become known as the leader of what is loosely called the liberal movement in this country.” The hosts acknowledge her political leadership, not for just women, but for Americans in general, and her work with United Nations made her a respected figure worldwide.

*Figure 2 The real Eleanor on "What's My Line?" (1953)*
On *The Frank Sinatra Timex Show* in 1960, Sinatra introduces Eleanor in this way: “As you no doubt are aware, there is a Gallup Poll taken every year to select the ten-most admired women in the world. This year for the eleventh consecutive time, the name at the top of that list is that of a lady whose friendship I treasure very much. Ladies and gentlemen, the most admired woman of our time, Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt.” (ER dominated this poll from its inception in 1948 through 1961.) When she appears on *What's My Line?* in 1953 to promote United Nations Week, ER signs in as “Eleanor Roosevelt,” but Dorothy Kilgallen addresses her as “Mrs. Franklin Delano Roosevelt” after guessing her identity. The unusual circumstance here is that Kilgallen and fellow female panelist Arlene Francis are women holding the stage at the same time as Eleanor. Dressed in cocktail gowns with elaborate coifs, quite coy with other guests and panelists, they present a very different version of femininity than ER in a plain black dress, carrying her own purse. Eleanor is given time to discuss the United Nations on a show that does not often stray from the comic. When it is time to leave, Kilgallen and Francis rise from their chairs to shake her hand, the only guest, male or female, for whom they do so in the history of the show. Eleanor Roosevelt is clearly not a woman that Francis or Kilgallen would categorize as a peer, and the way that she dresses and carries herself, as well as her topic of conversation, sets her apart from other women.

Eleanor herself calls attention to the role she plays as the woman by whom others will be judged. In Edward R. Murrow’s 1954 *Person to Person* visit with ER, he asks about her greatest or most satisfying achievement:

The thing I remember giving me the greatest pleasure was at the end of the first session in London of the United Nations. I had gone in fear and trembling, and I had felt that I had to walk very carefully because I was the first woman on the delegation. A woman must do well or it hurts all women. At the end of a session in which we had had a disagreement about the return of people against their will
to their countries of origin, both Mr. Dulles and Senator Vandenberg were kind enough to follow me up and in saying goodbye to say that they were glad that I had been on the delegation. While they had opposed me and begged the president not to appoint me, they found it good to work with me, and I think that pleased me almost more than anything that could have happened.

Eleanor had proven herself to two men who had opposed an appointment because of her gender, and this was her greatest accomplishment. Yet others clearly sometimes more clearly define her by her relationship to her husband, rather than a leader valued for her own political acumen. On The Bob Hope Christmas Special in 1950, Hope introduces her: “Tonight we have with us one of the world’s greatest women. Ladies and gentlemen, it is a privilege to present the mother of one of America’s best known families and also the wife of one of history’s greatest men, Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt.” Wife and mother trump any other accomplishments. The 1957 NBC program Wide Wide World: A Woman’s Story makes this attitude even more apparent. The show also features interviews with Margaret Mead, Senator Margaret Chase Smith, Helen Keller, and other well-known women, but it begins with host Dave Garroway addressing a male audience: “Today we have a story to tell that is close to every man’s heart—women.” The lead in to Eleanor’s appearance includes FDR’s life story with footage from his home at Hyde Park, none of it specifically about ER. The show defines her by her marriage to Franklin, rather than by her own accomplishments; as Garroway tells us, “The living link is a woman.”

Normative, Devoted Wife and Mother

Robert Rosenstone, foremost scholar on the historical film, writes, “We must look at historical films not for literal truths but more symbolic or metaphoric interpretations” (70). Essentially, Rosenstone’s primary message is that biographical films and docudramas will of course contain elements that are not necessarily historically accurate, but they also carry other
“truths.” These dramatic truths, or emotional truths, tell a narrative story in a different way to convey history to a much broader audience than those who might read a history or biography. Although the documentary generally has a higher indexical expectation for the way that it represents the past, its dominant discourses and the ways in which it frames events and people also reflect the issues and angsts of the time.

The following examination of the films and television shows featuring Eleanor Roosevelt shows that programs break down into two categories: those that seek to normalize her life, identity, persona, and roles, naturalizing her as white, upper class, heterosexual wife and mother; and others that call attention to her difference as a woman who challenged heteropatriarchal ideals of her time. The normative portrayals fall into three groups: 1) those that focus on Eleanor’s motivations to serve as a helpmate to her husband and the nation; 2) others that portray a feminist icon with an ideal equal marriage partnership; and 3) parodies that sexualize and infantilize her in order to confine her to expected social roles. The films that foreground her difference from other women narrativize her life in several ways: 1) because of her failed marriage, she is an incomplete woman who must find fulfillment outside the home; 2) because she is a bad mother and not close to her children, she extends her need for mothering to all of humanity; 3) because she is an asexual Victorian woman who is to blame for her own lonely existence and that of FDR; 4) because her anti-racist work marks her as “colored,” as I will outline below; and 5) because she lives a non-traditional life on her own terms, thus claiming her difference from the heteronormative, heteropatriarchal social norms.

The earliest fictional representations of Eleanor as a character in films take an approach that aligns with the image she created: the wife who was her husband’s eyes and ears. In Gender and Popular Culture, Katie Milestone and Anneke Meyer outline the role of the married woman
and implications of ties with motherhood as the most fulfilling job in society. As such, women’s identities connect to husbands and children in ways that wives and fatherhood are not for men (105), and early ER portrayals often fit into this mold. The British film *Great Day* (1945) revolves around preparations for her visit to observe women’s contributions to the war effort. “She’s not coming as the first lady of America, but as one of yourselves, a woman with a husband and a family and a home of her own. Just give her an idea of your war effort and of life in a wartime village.” This statement launches the film’s plot, which was written by a female screenwriter (Lesley Storm) and concentrates on themes of women’s solidarity. We do not actually see Eleanor until the final scene, when the proud village women receive her to showcase making woolen boots, bandages, jams, and other supplies for the troops. Filmmakers shoot her only from the back, keeping the focus on this group of women and their accomplishments. This is a noticeable use of ER as “just like them,” in the context of marriage and family. However, the film celebrates the work they do that in the interim is sometimes in spite of the men in their lives. The portrayal models women taking control of their own lives and situations, just like Mrs. Roosevelt, and it is a contemporary illustration of her worldwide influence as “a woman with a husband and family and home of her own.” The messages about women and their abilities are complex, showing inspirational independence, yet making sure to define this behavior in the context of marriage. The one negative portrayal of a female character is a woman who has chosen a single life and suffers for it. By extension, the portrayal of ER is also ambivalent in its insistence on leadership only in the context of proper marriage and family roles.
The first major portrayal of Eleanor for American audiences came in *Sunrise at Campobello*, a Tony-winning Broadway play and then a 1960 biographical film centering on FDR’s comeback from polio. The film’s tagline reveals additional themes: “Ralph Bellamy as the man who never forgot how to smile...Greer Garson as the woman who never forgot how to love.” The big, happy Roosevelt family is challenged by Franklin’s disease and recovery, but all come together to prepare him for the speech nominating Al Smith as presidential candidate—marking FDR’s ascendency on the national stage. Eleanor is the loving wife, the nursemaid who sleeps in a small bed by his side, should he need anything at all. She cries with him, shares embraces and intimate conversations about his loneliness, and sacrifices herself on his behalf. Her motivation is her love and appreciation, with lines like, “When I was an orphan adolescent, I felt unloved, unwanted. With you, I’ve always felt needed, wanted. That’s a blessing.” Greer Garson won the Golden Globe and received an Oscar for this Eleanor, whose total devotion credits her in large part with her husband’s success. FDR overcomes physical adversity and in
the process begins better to understand the struggles of the common person. Mrs. Roosevelt was a consultant on the film, made while she was still living, which may explain some of the extreme hagiography here. Writer Dore Schary (former President of MGM) was in the business of making both Roosevelts larger than life individuals beyond normal human limitations. For Eleanor, this means becoming super-wife and mother without an identity outside of her family.

Interestingly, FDR’s portrayal is very different from that of most men in biographical films, as it is unusual for a male to be as centrally concerned with love and marriage as part of his life story. Franklin Roosevelt could be said to be somewhat feminized here, in need of love and care, but this portrayal is likely considered the result of his infirmities, as in the end, he is shown leaving the domestic sphere, out into the political world of men again, when he is able to achieve the appearance of walking again in public. The film closely ties Eleanor’s later activities to FDR’s condition and includes his political mastermind Louis Howe coaxing her to begin political speaking engagements. “Eleanor, this work has to be done. You are for a time Franklin’s eyes, ears, and legs. You must go places he can’t go.” This despite protestations from Franklin’s mother, Sara Delano Roosevelt: “Is it true that Eleanor is out making another speech? You know my feelings about politics generally. It’s a tawdry business for a man and I believe shocking for a woman.” Both Louis and FDR overrule Sara in favor of Eleanor’s “eyes, ears and legs” keeping the Roosevelt name active, but there is no discussion of the kind of issues with which she is concerned or the people and groups she meets outside of the household. Unlike Great Day, for example, ER does not primarily connect with other women, only her family. This is more in keeping with the times, as the war effort required a different participation and solidarity from women, while in the United States in 1958, when the play debuted, or 1960 when the film appeared, popular culture demanded that women become more confined and isolated within
individual households. *Sunrise at Campobello* supports those 1950s American familial ideals by presenting ER as the perfect wife and mother who only leaves her home to support her husband and always comes back into the home, to her large, happy family.

What did Eleanor think of *Sunrise at Campobello*? She did not comment on it extensively, but notes, "It was a play, so far as I personally was concerned, about someone else" (411). Son James Roosevelt merely said, "Life is not always as the movies would have it" (55). ER’s character in particular is too perfect, too devoted, too much of a saint concerned only for her husband’s recovery and political success. One reviewer at the time points out its “particular brand of wholesomeness and sentimentality” (*Film Quarterly* 62), a view likely even more prevalent for those watching today in more cynical times. This is not a film readily available on DVD, and online comments are few, but the “Classic Film Freak” website review in 2014 includes additional historical information with which viewers would not have been familiar in 1960. “The portrayal in the film of their relationship as all warmth and roses is also a bit short of accurate, as the two had been living all but separate lives” (Orypeck). It was not until after Eleanor’s death that Jonathan Daniels wrote about FDR’s affair with Lucy Mercer in *The Time Between the Wars*, published in 1966. Later that same year, James addressed the affair in a 1966 collection of FDR’s personal letters, and Joseph Lash’s 1971 book *Eleanor and Franklin* extensively examined its impact on ER. Later, both sons Elliott (1973) and James (1976) also had more to say in books about their famous family. In the period before general public knowledge of the affair, coverage of Eleanor is likely to focus on her role as wonderful wife. The *CBS News Special Report: First Lady Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt*, a program that aired on the day of her death on November 7, 1962, is indicative of these kinds of interpretations. Narrator Charles Collingwood tells the audience:
From that very first day, the president’s wife was at his side serving as his personal contact with the people he was to govern. She had both to take him to the people and the people to him. She was also a mother and a grandmother, and Christmas shopping season saw her in toy departments of the Washington stores. For the First Lady, there are also functions for the children of the nation, such as the Easter egg roll on the White House lawn.

Here she is seen as not only a woman who is an extension of FDR, but the voiceover occurs over archival footage of her with children, further promoting an image of an idealized, typical mother and grandmother that is in contrast to her political activities. The gendered nature of the report then goes even further over images of ER in an inaugural ball gown: “With it all, she was very much a woman. The camera did not flatter her, but she posed for the cameras previewing her inaugural ball gown.” The program innately juxtaposes “woman” to what were seen as more “manly” pursuits of public policy. It does call attention to her perceived “ugliness,” but also seeks to normalize her appearance as a woman wearing a very feminine gown, not the horseback riding jodhpurs for which some criticized her, or the more usual simple dresses. However, a separate segment, a recorded interview with Dave Dugan, acknowledges her importance to women: “Mrs. Roosevelt, I think that you are in many ways a symbol to many American women. You bridge the period of time in this country from when women weren’t supposed to take part in public affairs to a point now when they are. It must have been quite an experience for you to take part in this transition, wasn’t it?” Here we see the recognition of changing gender roles in the United States and the ways the press relates these changes to ER’s legacy, while the rest of the program firmly keeps her persona within the accepted and normative.

The next year (1963), CBS aired the first Biography episode celebrating her life. Mike Wallace narrates the standard story known from her volumes of autobiography and interviews, so the program repeats lines from the Roosevelts’ own PR.
From the very beginning, Mrs. Roosevelt makes it clear that she intends to be more than a mere ornament on the White House reception line. She is sent on a tour of the country by FDR. He wants her to serve as his eyes and legs. ... It is 1942. Once again she has become the eyes and legs of FDR, reporting to him not about a Depression riddled nation, but about a war torn world.

It is not that ER was not useful to FDR in this sort of capacity, but the commentary reduces her political career to serving an invalid husband instead of fulfilling her own interests and skills.

The end of the piece focuses on her work at the UN, allowing a few words from Eleanor that identifies her “womanliness” in a different way. “I knew I would have to do the very best I could because I was the only woman on the delegation, and it would be letting all women who might in the future have this opportunity down if I didn’t do well.” Rather than “woman” defined as the feminine stereotype, she herself calls attention to the pressures and discrimination that pioneering women such as herself face. That same year, *Perspective on Greatness: First Lady of the World* includes a focus on her contributions at the United Nations, yet it also puts these accomplishments in the context of the normative discourses. At various points throughout, narrator Celeste Holm tells the audience: “With her husband unable to walk, she took on herself the job of visiting as many of the tent cities of what he had called the forgotten man. ... She was to become the legs of her husband at many occasions. ... She loved children, and they adored her. ... With her sons in uniform, she seemed to adopt the whole army as part of the family.”

Another observer of the UN notes, “She simply moved in as a super-mother presiding over a large family.” Here her inherent “motherly” nature takes center stage, as well as her role as wife. Eleanor becomes a mother of the nation during WWII, an image promoted by the Roosevelt administration as she visited troops in the Pacific and England. Opponents criticized her more heavily during the war for civil justice activities, and the Roosevelts once again retooled her image, this time as a motherly figure. ER did have four enlisted sons, and this status served to frame the work she did around our “boys in uniform” as well as promote women’s contributions
in the absence of men. While commentators do not characterize the male UN delegation as fatherly, this program trivializes her work at the United Nations by framing her achievements not as brilliant political negotiations, but the natural actions of a mother over a brood of unruly children. This documentary’s inclusion of these comments serves up a simplified version of a normative American woman devoted to family life, rather than her formidable presence verbally battling the Russians with gavel in hand. On the other hand, it is very much a celebration of her life’s work and includes one rather radical statement from ER: “Women have one advantage over men. Throughout history, they have been forced to make adjustments. Readjustment is a kind of private revolution.” The modern viewer may infer that this could apply to her husband’s infidelities, but there is no such context here.

In 1965, the Oscar for Best Documentary Feature went to *The Eleanor Roosevelt Story*, written by poet and three-time Pulitzer Prize winner Archibald MacLeish, narrated by MacLeish and Emmy Award nominated journalist Eric Sevareid. This was a theater film release, and Houghton Mifflin published the book containing MacLeish’s screenplay and a collection of photographs of ER. *The Harvard Crimson* begins its review: “Bosley Crowther called *The Eleanor Roosevelt Story* the best documentary ever made. For perhaps the first time in his professional life, Mr. Crowther is right” (Hessler). Crowther, writing for *The New York Times*, relays more: “Tears have not trickled so frankly and unashamedly from my eyes and pride has not surged so strongly and sincerely in my heart while watching a motion picture—well, not in a long time, anyhow—as they did while watching *The Eleanor Roosevelt Story.*” Clearly, Eleanor Roosevelt was a much-loved figure for many Americans, and this documentary found new life in 1997 when released on videocassette with a new introduction by then First Lady Hillary Clinton. Today, the DVD is available on Netflix and Amazon.com. Yet more recent viewers are not as
likely to enjoy such lyrical tributes. *Billboard* called the home video “tedious” and “as lifeless as a high school textbook” (Olson), and a 2011 comment on IMDb intones:

I hate it for a film about anyone to be so gushing and fully [sic] of flowery prose… Heck, if I were Mrs. Roosevelt, I’d be turning in my grave or haunting those who made the film because it seems so unreal—like she was being nominated for sainthood! (planktonrules)

*The Eleanor Roosevelt Story*, however, reflected a common biographical documentary style for 1965, and featured voice-over narration written by a poet. The prose reveals a great reverence for Eleanor Roosevelt, as well as some of the standard normalizing strategies.

She was a great lady, as everyone kept saying over and over, the First Lady of the world, but what the world found in her was a woman. A warm, completely honest, fearless woman, who had lived a woman’s life, accepted a woman’s responsibilities and changed the history of her time.

This narration takes place over images of an older ER greeting children at her home, naturalizing her great works as a woman nurturing and taking care of her world, just in this case a world that extended outside of the home to the nation and an international platform. The liberal *New Republic*’s 1965 film review makes this feminized view of Eleanor and her work incredibly clear: “The film is composed, properly, from a thoroughly feminine viewpoint” (Kauffmann).

However, there are competing subtexts to this dominant discourse around “the great lady.” The film gives us the standard history of ER’s life, but differs when it gets to WWI, describing this as a turning point when she begins volunteering for the Red Cross in Washington, DC, even filing a report on the dreadful conditions she finds in a mental institution for shell-shocked soldiers. This is work outside her home and family, prior to the public disclosure of FDR’s World War I era affair in 1966, and includes ER’s desire to help others at this time. While this is not political ambition, but another kind of caretaking skill, this recognition of a public life prior to FDR’s polio is groundbreaking, if little recognized by viewers. The kind of narration typically only
applies to her life after the White House: “A new force had appeared in the world, although the world would not know it for some years to come, a woman who accepted personal responsibility for her country and her time.” Immediately after this segment, the film moves on to Franklin’s polio and the entry of ER into politics to further his political career, but one portion of the documentary does promote a view of Eleanor as a woman who pursued activities outside of the home, long before most early biographers and filmmakers adopted the Roosevelt “eyes and ears” line.

This biography and other early films are silent on Eleanor’s personal life outside of husband, children, and grandchildren, as the Lorena Hickok letters would not become public for many years, still in the realm of gossip, as was FDR’s private life outside the marriage. Still, for viewers today, there are other visual clues in the images of Lorena Hickok accompanying ER as she visits the Caribbean or in the stare of Nancy Cook from Marion Dickerman’s home movie footage. They are a silent presence that would not find a voice for another two decades, a contrast to 1964’s The World of Eleanor Roosevelt, a television fundraiser for the Eleanor Roosevelt Foundation. This musical variety show with performances from Harry Belafonte, Joan Baez, and Marian Anderson also features commentary from stars like Gregory Peck, Paul Newman, Joanne Woodward, and Edward G. Robinson, who flips through a photo album and while looking at an image of her holding a child, says, “Mrs. Roosevelt’s work had just begun as United States delegate to the United Nations, as chairman of the declaration of Human Rights, but her private life mattered more now as great-grandmother.” For Robinson, ER’s “private life” is about her “natural” role as woman, as mother and grandmother, not as an adult person with personal needs and relationships. The projected normativity, which avoids inquiry into a real private life, is noticeable since the album contains few private photos. Later in the program,
Ralph Bellamy (FDR in *Sunrise at Campobello*) reads questions that Eleanor actually received in the mail, and Agnes Moorehead answers while playing ER. He asks, “How do you explain the fact that you’ve grown so much better looking as you’ve grown older?” Moorehead replies, “Why, thank you for the compliment. It simply means that as you grow older people don’t expect you to be as good looking as they expect a young person to be, so they’re kinder in their judgments.” Once again, “ugly Eleanor” is an issue: it is as if she became more of a “real woman” as she grew older, when beauty standards change with age and women may sometimes move beyond these conventional ideals. If this is the case, the “ugly” Eleanor gains acceptance as an older woman, told that she is now better looking.

![Figure 4 Ellen Geer in Voyagers "Destiny's Choice" (1983)—“You can do it darling.”](image)

As the 1970s dawned and the feminist movement became more prominent in American popular culture, some of the most idealized heteronormative pictures of Eleanor Roosevelt began to wane. However, the stereotypes continue today, partly because Franklin Roosevelt’s biographers do not often deal with ER in a serious way, regarding her simply as the adjunct of
her husband. Doris Kearns Goodwin, author of *No Ordinary Time: Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt—The Home Front in World War II* (1995), appears in several documentaries as an expert on both powerhouse personalities, but is, in fact, more of an FDR scholar who paints a limited portrait of Eleanor. In her review of this Pulitzer Prize winning book, Allida Black writes that Goodwin “clearly prefers FDR” and is not comfortable “assessing ER’s personal motivations and support networks.” On both the *Think Tank* and *Charlie Rose* shows in 1995, the author repeats the standard “eyes and ears” depiction without additional commentary. For example, Rose asks, “How did FDR use Eleanor?” Goodwin replies, “Oh, in a million ways, the most obvious way because of his polio was that he needed her, as he said, as his eyes and his ears, so she traveled the country....” A variety of insightful answers could examine that public and private relationship, rather than accepting a public relations construction from the 1920s and ‘30s. Many films and television programs are similarly predictable. The smash 1973 hit *The Way We Were* utilizes the figure of ER to differentiate liberal activist Katie (Barbra Streisand) from boyfriend Hubbell (Robert Redford) and his conservative, moneyed friends. On the day of FDR’s death, Hubbell’s friends are telling jokes about Eleanor’s buck teeth and visits with coal miners, and Katie explodes: “Her husband is dead. Dead! Yes, Mrs. Roosevelt went down into the mines, and when they asked her why, she said, ‘I am my husband’s legs. Do you tell cripple jokes too?’” The Roosevelts are both icons to Katie, yet the film manages to reduce ER once again. The TV series *Voyagers* allowed its characters to go back in time “to help history along, give it a push when it’s needed.” In the 1983 episode “Destiny’s Choice,” they find FDR (Nicholas Pryor) working as a Hollywood director after contracting polio and determining that his political career is finished. The “push” they give is not only to Franklin to reach for his political dreams, but to Eleanor (Ellen Geer) to get behind him as a faithful wife. In the closing
moments, the visitors get him to try walking on crutches. As he makes his way to ER, she encourages, “Come here Franklin. You can do it darling. Just a little farther. Oh, Franklin, I love you.” This characterization might have stepped out of *Sunrise at Campobello* from twenty years earlier, only this time wearing ultra-feminine pink.

![Figure 5 Cynthia Nixon in "Warm Springs" (2005)](image)

Twelve years after that, another throwback appeared in HBO’s television movie *Warm Springs* from 2005. It won five Emmys, including Outstanding Made for Television Movie, and was nominated for eleven others, but while this portrait of FDR’s (Kenneth Branagh) recovery from polio shows him as complex and multi-dimensional, Eleanor (Cynthia Nixon) is once again the supportive wife who will do anything for her husband. It is a retelling of the *Sunrise at Campobello* story, only this time, Franklin’s affair with Lucy Mercer begins the tale, making ER’s devotion even more remarkable. Filmmakers put her in a dominant position, both morally and physically, as their confrontation takes place on a staircase with Eleanor at the top. “I don’t know whether to hate you or thank you … for forcing me to face my life honestly for the first time.” Although she offers him a divorce, they stay in the marriage for a political career and the
money that comes from being in his mother’s good graces, but soon after in on-screen time, polio
strikes. While he convalesces in the waters of Warm Springs, Georgia, ER comes to visit, and
FDR tells her:

I refuse to be a burden to you. …I want to offer you the freedom you once so
generously offered me. Listen, all you’ve ever known is duty to me and to a
political career that unless I can walk again no longer exists. You’ve been
exemplary. Now I’m telling you that you’re free to go.

This Eleanor is such an exemplary wife that she responds not only with duty to her now invalid
husband, but overwhelming love. “I don’t want freedom. I want a marriage. I want a life with
you.” The script ignores the evidence of the last several decades about the very separate lives
that these two people led and manufactures the ultimate wife. Before leaving Warm Springs, she
tells him, “Franklin Roosevelt, I do so love you.” Both FDR and ER cry with one another,
showing an emotional intimacy that did not likely exist. The production is not as sentimental as
its 1960 predecessor is, and anguishing scenes present the mental and physical effects of
Franklin’s polio, but Eleanor’s character is like a cardboard cutout, a martyr who will do
anything for her husband. This is puzzling for 2005 on HBO—that is until listening to the Blu-
ray audio commentary from director Joseph Sargent and screenwriter Margaret Nagle, which
reveals that Nagle really does see ER as the devoted wife. She frequently repeats her own
family’s story of “living with someone disabled,” and what they went through when her brother
became a paraplegic. She has intimate ties to the disability theme and what she “knows” about
what it does to marriages, regardless of how different this particular marriage of the Roosevelts
may be from her own experience.

They’ve got to redefine their marriage. They’ve got to start over again, and
they’re not able to do it yet. Going home is actually incredibly painful for him
because they still don’t know who they are. Both Eleanor and Franklin don’t
know who they are in this marriage, and this is common when someone
undergoes a disability because the roles shift. Everybody’s roles in a family, in a
disability, change.

For Nagle, they start over again by loving one another in ways they had not since the Mercer
affair. Instead of what many see as the role of polio in freeing Eleanor as she went out into the
political world, even if it was to keep Franklin’s name in the political arena, this writer sees it as
the important event to cement a model marriage.

They had gone through so much with Lucy Mercer, and she had “stayed” for his
political career. Now the political career is seemingly not going to happen, and
she really digs in because he is a paraplegic and she’s not going to leave him. I
mean, the polio committed her to him in a way that she had not been committed to
him before…. Everything in the marriage is up for renegotiation at this point,
which is very common in these situations.

FDR, and by extension ER, are such heroic figures to Nagle that she becomes angry
when Sargent brings up Missy LeHand, Franklin’s personal secretary and confidant for
twenty-one years. Many believe that she and her boss also shared a sexual relationship,
yet Nagle left her out of the original screenplay completely and blames those implications
on political foes. “You can’t prove anything about Missy LeHand and Franklin
Roosevelt, but the Republicans love to make all these rumors about Missy LeHand. …
She wasn’t his mistress, and you can ask any of the major historians.” (One assumes she
would also say the same of ER and Lorena Hickok.)

Historian Geoffrey Ward’s commentary in *The Roosevelts: An Intimate History*
(2014) effectively negates Nagle’s view of what polio did for the Roosevelt marriage:

It’s nice to think that Franklin and Eleanor were brought together again somehow
by polio. They were not. They in fact were driven further apart by it. She began a
career of her own with his encouragement. He spent months and months and
months away from her trying to rebuild his muscles. … It’s simply a romantic
myth. It’s not true.
Although he does not reference his own experience with polio within the documentary itself, Ward divulges in a Blu-ray extra feature that he also has been touched by polio. When he tears up talking about FDR’s struggles, this information would have been useful if acknowledged in the text itself, as it both explains some of Ward’s emotional response as well as strengthening his points about not trying to romanticize the effects of the condition on families and relationships. A survey of hundreds of viewer comments about *Warm Springs* reveals that many are critical in response based on prior knowledge, although some ingest the film’s messages as history. “Calvinnme” on IMDb says that it is not “character assassination of a truly great leader long dead ... to point out that a person can be far less than perfect personally and still be that truly great leader.” In this person’s mind, polio “did not bring them close together.” Mary Ross adds on Amazon.com, “The storyline of the brave, supportive wife is hard to believe,” and an Amazon.com post from “GM” mentions, “The movie seems to present his love life in a sort of redemptive arc, which was not the case in the real world.” A Netflix viewer writes, “No offense, but it’s rather simplistic and feminine in approach.” One assumes this reference to the feminization of the script is about the romanticization of the marital relationship. This coincides with another Netflix customer who complains about Eleanor’s portrayal on “the wussy side” in comparison to other understandings of her personality. Others refer directly to what they understand as Eleanor’s historical lesbianism, in a film that contains nary a hint of the possibility, not even reference to her separate social life. However, there is subtextual fodder for queer viewers with the presence of self-identified lesbian actor Cynthia Nixon in the role of Eleanor. A minority of viewers like “Blanche” on IMDb see this as “a beautiful portrayal of Eleanor Roosevelt, who, though disillusioned
in her marriage, remains a true partner to FDR” and “Robert W.” on IMDb understands the portrayal of a “dedicated and loving wife Eleanor Roosevelt.” The contrast in popular reception of the film and its characterizations reminds us that interpretations of these cinematic constructions always depend on the spectator’s knowledge, political points of view, and other factors of identity. One person’s “dewy eyed emotion” is another’s “independent woman and political partner.” However, not all of the normalizing is from admirers. A&E’s *The American Experience* “Eleanor Roosevelt” episode in 2000 includes a short segment with Roosevelt detractors. In a very telling comment, William Rusher, son of a supporter of 1936 Republican presidential candidate Alf Landon, explains:

> It has been said that Eleanor Roosevelt viewed the world as one vast slum project. She was always flitting around here and there coming to some community whose condition she didn’t like and tutting about and insisting that something must be done. She seems to have a large political equivalent of the housewife’s desire to redecorate.

His dismissal of her as “housewife” and “redecorator” seeks to trivialize ER’s contributions as the meddlesome work of a woman who did not belong in the world of men’s politics, thus making her like any other woman in that world who was told to stay at home where she belonged.
Another biographical work relies on the recollections of people who actually knew ER and place her in the context of the stereotypical wife and mother. Lillian Rogers Parks, a maid at the White House for three decades, wrote the book *Backstairs at the White House*, with additional remembrances by her mother Maggie Rogers, also a White House employee. Although the book and 1979 television mini-series purport to show the personal lives of the presidents and their families, writers scrubbed the story clean of controversy or revelation of transgressions. From the moment she appears on screen, ER (Eileen Heckart) is a mother with a large family, and this maternal status explains her down-to-earth appearance and manner, especially when contrasted with the formal Hoover family as predecessors. She soon enters the kitchen and says to the shocked African-American staff, “Oh my, you’re so busy down here. You need help. I have raised five children. I’ve served a lot of meals,” as she takes a plate to the dining room herself. A practical knowledge of work in a kitchen, arising from her presumed preparation of
meals for a large family, symbolically reduces the civil rights leader’s motivations for political work to a woman’s natural role. In reality, ER had servants all her life and admitted that she did not know how to cook anything but scrambled eggs. A segment on WWII also references the importance of her role as a mother, when her character says, “Do you know, if the mothers of the world formed a coalition, there would never be a war?” When one thinks about everything that these women must have really seen in the White House, the focus on a maternal ER is an odd one. After the release of the Lorena Hickok letters, Parks would write *The Roosevelts: A Family in Turmoil* in 1981, a real “tell all” version of *Backstairs*. She talks about “Hicky” and how happy Parks was that Eleanor was in love, not lonely like some other authors had claimed. She likewise acknowledges Missy LeHand for her role in FDR’s personal life, but none of this appeared in the normative, idealized *Backstairs at the White House* series or book.

Finally, one other work that seeks to normalize ER is the orientation film shown at the FDR Library and Museum when visitors enter, also available for purchase on DVD in the museum store. *A Rendezvous with History: The Roosevelts of Hyde Park* (2003) is a celebration of the lives and achievements of both figures. It stays away from heavy-handed gender stereotypes, but succumbs to a portrayal of Eleanor as a selfless saint. Granddaughter Anna Eleanor Roosevelt states:

> I’m so proud of my grandmother. She wanted to be helpful. There was nothing complicated about this. There was nothing ambitious about this. She simply looked at who she was and where she was and tried to figure out how to be helpful.

Seemingly innocuous, the comment trivializes ER’s work as a recognized political strategist enjoying power in the Democratic Party, and influencing a large portion of the
American public with daily columns and political activities for which she sought press coverage. Her actions were most often intentional, with specific goals and interests, often complicated, and often ambitious. Her granddaughter seeks to compliment Eleanor, yet falls into the trap of many women’s biographers who do not take adequate account of their subject’s hard work and vision, instead making her life fit into conventional standards that do not reveal “unfeminine” traits.

Equal Partnership: The Ideal Feminist Marriage

Many in the feminist movement in the 1970s and ‘80s rejected the portrayal of Eleanor as an extension of her husband and family, a wife and mother rather than her own person. ER became an icon as an independent woman. Yet the feminist movement
was not without its own normalizing forces and stereotypes. A new ideal of marriages that were equal partnerships between men and women became a part of popular culture, and the Roosevelt marriage was adapted to fit this model. A range of docudramas, biographies, and even a musical, portray a husband and wife who share power at the White House dinner table, crossing borders between personal and public relationships. Quintessential representations include three WWII era television mini-series from the 1980s, *The Winds of War* (1983) and *War and Remembrance* (1988), both Emmy winners adapted from Herman Wouk novels, and *Crossings* (1986), based on a Danielle Steele romance. In the sixth episode of *The Winds of War*, “The Changing of the Guard,” FDR (Ralph Bellamy in another role reprise) and ER (Elizabeth Hoffman) host a dinner party with the two of them literally balancing the table at either end. Both are pleasant and entertaining, talking about the war and US strategy as equals in political discussions. The contrast is deliberate with the main character, Pug Henry (Robert Mitchum), and his wife Polly (Rhoda Henry), who is ignorant of matters of war and more interested in Navy officer gossip, while Eleanor is intelligent, knowledgeable, and portrayed much more like the male characters. In an earlier episode, “Defiance,” ER is almost like an intimate advisor involved in decision-making discussions between FDR and Pug, as she questions as well as supports Franklin about helping the British. When the President makes martinis, he serves them to both Eleanor and Pug, symbolically showing his wife’s equal footing with the naval officer. This may seem like a small moment to the average viewer, but ER’s known dislike of alcohol (with a father and brother who died because of its abuse), very often turns to her disfavor of FDR’s social activities. The disregard for this historical information transforms into an equalizing factor. *Crossings* copycats the
balanced table scene in another dinner party with FDR (Jack Denton) and ER (Alice Hirson) at either end and French Ambassador Armand DeVilliers (Christopher Plummer) and wife Liane (Cheryl Ladd) in between with other guests. Eleanor finds an ally in Liane, as they talk about helping European Jews enter into the US before the war. Afterwards, Armand tells his wife, “Franklin adores women with a quick mind,” which seems a compliment to both women, as this is a marriage also portrayed as one between loving equals. *Winds of War* sequel *War and Remembrance* continues these same themes, as in the second episode, Eleanor is a central part of conversation with the Admiral, more colleague than typical wife. However, we see that this is still a marital relationship when a doctor calls in ER to “make sure” FDR takes his medication and stops smoking. The two seem intimate, and she is very concerned about his health and spirits during the long war.

*Figure 8 Lois De Banzie singing with Annie (Aileen Quinn) and FDR (Edward Herrmann) in "Annie" (1982)*
The 1982 Oscar nominated hit musical *Annie* includes a similar relationship between the First Couple, although adjusted to fit lighter content. When Daddy Warbucks (Albert Finney) brings orphan Annie (Aileen Quinn) to the White House, ER (Lois De Banzie) plays a crucial role in convincing conservative Republican Warbucks to support New Deal social programs that will benefit children. She serves tea, treats their visitors warmly, and is an important component to the administration with the kindly FDR (Edward Herrmann). All three, Eleanor, Franklin, and Annie, sing together to convince Warbucks to join them. On the other end of the theatrical spectrum, *Eleanor: In Her Own Words* appeared on PBS’s American Playhouse in 1987, and the Emmy nominated monologue was available to the public on videocassette. In the one-woman show that utilizes ER’s words to create the image of a feminist ER, the equal of FDR, Eleanor (Lee Remick) herself is the focus, with nary an appearance from her famous husband. In one of the first segments, she responds to press questions: “No, I have never wanted to be a man. I have often wanted to be more effective as a woman, but I never felt that trousers would do the trick.” Later she says, “I found as time went by that people no longer considered me a mouthpiece for my husband, but realized that I had a point of view of my own with which he might not at all agree.” Addressing the first volume of her autobiography, which was serialized in *Ladies Home Journal*, Remick recreates Eleanor’s words: “When the magazine made me the guest of honor at a literary party, I realized just how wonderful it was to have recognition for something I had done myself, not on account of Franklin’s position.” Over and over, this play casts ER as an individual with strong opinions and a political life of her own, in fact subtly surpassing FDR: “Two days before my husband’s first press conference, I conducted my own, the first ever by a
First Lady.” Near the end, the production contextualizes the image of independent
Eleanor by this line: “When the last child went to boarding school, I began to want to do
things on my own, to use my own mind and abilities for my own aims.” At no time does
she repeat that she was Franklin’s “eyes and ears” or talk about motivations around
marriage and motherhood. Nor does she disparage her husband, or appear to be a woman
who led a complicated familial and social life. She is merely Eleanor Roosevelt, feminist
icon, an individual valued for her own contributions and opinions. Yet one reviewer
criticizes the program for this approach as still lacking. In The Journal of American
History, Elizabeth I. Perry notes, “Roosevelt was modest about her accomplishments.
Using her own words without adding insights from private documents or from the
memories of others fails to establish a historical context for her life or to communicate its
deeper significance” (1113). Perry’s argument is similar to other feminist analysis of
women’s biography that understates accomplishment. However, one could argue that this
play is a step forward over earlier portrayals.

Figure 9 Lee Remick in "Eleanor: In Her Own Words" (1987)
This feminist ER, not subsumed by her marriage, is an image that became a part of the television documentary in the late 1980s and the following decades. While the 1960s documentary works generally allow a glimpse of this figure, they still normalize Eleanor as wife and mother. In the 1980s and beyond, they are more likely to offer voices that differ in how they view her role in the world. Against the Odds: Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt (1988) includes the standard “his legs and his eyes” message, but in a minor way. More prominent is the feminist, equal to her husband: “In life she found a place not behind her husband, but beside him. She led American women into a new era of independence.” The half hour program also locates the beginning of ER’s work outside the home during WWI, when she “rebelled” and “joined the war effort, working in the Red Cross canteen.” Later this documentary discusses her work with the League of Women voters and Democratic Party, not tied to Franklin’s polio and a desire simply to keep his name alive. “Eleanor became a politician in her own right.” Great Americans for Children: Eleanor Roosevelt (2003), with a format of an adult host talking to kids about famous Americans in history, begins with a boy asking, “Eleanor Roosevelt—wasn’t she the wife of president?” The host, “Jan,” responds, “Yes, George, but she was a lot more than that.” ER as a role model for girls and boys is the primary concern of this educational video program, which acknowledges that some may errantly dismiss Mrs. Roosevelt as an extension of the President. The show tells viewers that FDR “was interested in Eleanor’s interests and views” when they met as young people and covers her volunteer work for the Red Cross in WWII. While it does lapse into the “eyes and ears” cliché, this time the pitch is slightly different in that it empowers her character. “Eleanor suggested that while he regained his health, she would act as his eyes, ears, and
legs.” Here she, not FDR or Louis Howe, is the primary motivator to begin speaking publicly. Another documentary focused on FDR relays a similar message, that ER had the power position in this decision. In *FDR: A Presidency Revealed* (2005), narrator Edward Herrmann tells us:

> Initially, FDR wanted Eleanor to abandon her career and assume the role of White House hostess, but she quickly convinced him that she could become his roving ambassador, travel across the breadth of the nation reporting back on conditions ordinary Americans faced during the darkest years of the Great Depression.

Both of these early post-millennial documentaries advance a feminist ER who made her own decisions in the marriage, the one who “suggests” or “convinces,” rather than accepts a role based on duty to husband and nation. This is a normalized feminist woman, but not one primarily viewed as living a life outside the marriage.

ER’s life also became a model for those with feminist inclinations through her characterization as the “everywoman” who dealt with the same struggles over the balance between work and family that would later become a public issue in the backlash against feminist ideals. *We Remember Eleanor* (1984) includes interviews with people who remember ER from differing perspectives on the one-hundredth anniversary of her birth. Estelle Linzer, Vice-Chair of the United Nations Association, describes her as the “personification of the 20th century woman who went through many identity crises—from orphan, to young bride, to mother, to wife of a very famous man, the leader of the world, and then finally herself as leader in the United Nations.” The message here is that one cannot “have it all” at one time, but that after marriage and children, a woman may step outside of the domestic sphere into the public realm. Even then, this may lead to a “crisis” of identity. Even as early as 1951, when Eleanor appeared on the premiere of the
Sarah Churchill Show, the famous prime minister’s daughter introduces her with a similar timeline approach to women’s lives: “To me she seems a woman who has embraced three careers: that of wife, mother and humanitarian with that wise understanding and her heartwarming personality.” It may be a way for others to soften feminism so that mother and wife are equal in importance to other careers in a way that allows those suspicious of women’s work outside the home to accept the normalized feminist.

Sexualized, Inconsequential Woman

Figure 10 FDR (Barry Bostwick) and Lin Shaye in "FDR: American Badass!" (2012)

Media critics recognize that hypersexualization often applies to female characters in ways that do not apply to men and male characters. Although Eleanor Roosevelt and her fictional personages are usually not subject to such objectification (perhaps because
she is a revered figure, considered “ugly” by male standards, and usually an older woman, thus avoiding over-sexualization), three productions manage to contain ER by making her this kind of “everywoman” and thus inconsequential. A recent example of this is *FDR: American Badass!* (2012), made by the team who also brought us *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter* (2012), both revisionist historical spoofs. Here, a werewolf that carries polio bites FDR (Barry Bostwick). This gives him the superpowers necessary to defeat the Axis in WWII, personally killing Hitler and Mussolini with rapid fire guns strapped to his wheelchair. Eleanor (Lin Shaye) is no feminist icon or even asexual matron. Franklin refers to her as “Kitten Breasts,” and it is his feminization after polio that causes her to consider divorce. After he returns from the successful European mission a great war hero, the masculine weapons substituting for his legs, she climbs into his lap and tells him, “I’m going to ride you like a free pony at the state fair tonight” (not a shocking line within the context of the movie). The film features a great deal of what we would consider stereotypically male sexual humor, like a Missy LeHand (Robin Sydney) who sexually fetishes his legs, and even ER cannot escape this. The infantilization of women also represents their inconsequential nature. *Badass!* reduces ER to a woman who does not belong in male conversations with comments like, “I love you Eleanor, but you’ve got to just shut the fuck up when grown men are conversing” or “Shhh, grown men conversing. Seen not heard, Eleanor.” This is obviously intentional, so that ER is like any other woman who is merely a childlike, sexual being for misogynist protagonists. A Netflix viewer asks for even more, “They could have vamped her [ER] with a little girl on girl humor to deal with the historical view.” *FDR: A One Man Show* (1987), a farce with a lot of historical nonsense by comedian Chris Elliott, goes as far as
to use a manikin to represent ER with an unintelligible *Charlie Brown*-like voice. When Japanese planes attack the White House, they blow off the head of the dummy, and ER is an annoying object who is dispensable. Both of these parodies present Eleanor as simply unexceptional in the male world.

A surprise addition to a sexualized ER is *FDR: That Man in the White House*, the 1982 television version of the one-man monologue by *Sunrise at Campobello* writer Dore Schary, featuring Robert Vaughn as FDR. At one point, he speaks to Eleanor, who is off screen: “That’s a new dress isn’t it? Mmm, yes, I like that, a little more cleavage there than usual. No, I’m not criticizing. It’s rather attractive.” This causes laughter from the theater audience, since it contradicts what one might expect from a serious play about the couple, and viewers even find it laughable in its suggestion that there was a sexual component to the presidential marriage. It is a contrast to any other serious consideration of Eleanor, who apart from the two farcical comedies referenced above, is not a sexual being in filmic representations. This very brief reference normalizes her as everywoman but in a different way from the wife, mother, or feminist role model. The comment makes the FDR/ER partnership an idealized marriage with a shared marital bed.
An Incomplete Woman

Although the word “queer” most often refers to gender identity and sexuality, queer theory has shaped how a variety of disciplines look at individuals and groups of people defined as different from the norm or what is considered the natural order of social and family life. The first section of this paper examined how film and television normalizes the figure of Eleanor Roosevelt, understanding her as a person who fits into accepted roles for women in American culture. However, an equal number of TV programs and movies queer ER by depicting her life as outside heteronormative models, identified this way by contemporaries, writers, and filmmakers, or how she herself may have resisted heteropatriarchal institutions and norms. The most canonical biographical mini-series, which was the first docudrama mini-series on television (Edgerton 160), is still widely referenced by today’s viewers—Emmy winner Eleanor and Franklin (1976) and its lauded sequel Eleanor and Franklin: The White House Years (1977). Aired at a time when the Bicentennial increased the public’s interest in American historical subjects
in general, these works enjoyed later releases on videocassette and DVD, with broad access on Netflix. Based on the Pulitzer Prize winning book *Eleanor and Franklin: The Story of Their Relationship, based on Eleanor Roosevelt's Private Papers* by ER’s friend Joseph Lash, the television programs reflect Lash’s personal relationship with Eleanor and his conversations with her children and friends. While the works of the 1960s created a picture of ER as the model wife and mother who lived to serve her husband and the world, Lash’s work shifted the paradigm to one of the suffering saint, a woman who could not find fulfillment within a troubled marriage and thus lived a sad, lonely life brightened by giving to others outside of her family. “She was a woman of sorrow who had surmounted her own unhappiness and managed to carry on, stoical toward herself, understanding and tender towards others” (449). This refers to the Mercer affair; she is clearly defined by her lack of a normative marriage, and this characterization seeks to explain her good works in a way that marks her as different from other women who aspire to romantic love in a marital context. The saint transcends earthly needs of love and desire, and the very first line of dialogue in the film expresses this theme of the importance of sacrifice. At a public event, a moderator praises ER (Jane Alexander): “We especially want to thank our gracious First Lady for her presence, for her wonderful speech, which meant delaying her visit to the President in Warm Springs in order to be with us, another instance of her always being ready to sacrifice her own interests in a good cause.” Moments later, a note calls her to the White House, where she learns of FDR’s death in Warm Springs, Georgia. After quickly traveling south, Cousin Laura Delano (Anna Lee) tells her that Franklin (Edward Herrmann) was with Lucy Mercer (Linda Kelsey) when he passed away. When she views the body and then accompanies
him on the train back to Washington, DC, the program switches into flashback mode as
she remembers his betrayal and affair with Lucy in 1918. It then moves into the story of
her life as a child, the teenage years at Allenswood, the FDR/ER courtship, early
marriage, and children and family life before the affair. The context of the affair frames
Eleanor’s early life in such a way that the betrayal shapes her entire adult life and serves
as the motivation for her political work. In essence, it tells viewers that this was a sad and
lonely woman within a failed marriage and thus she had to find work outside the home to
find some kind of fulfillment.

In the book, Lash goes as far as referring to her “desolating conviction that she
had failed as a woman,” without reference to specifically how he knows this information
(325). (Much of his book includes citations to specific letters or conversations, but the
psychologizing often does not.) One may infer that this interpretation of Eleanor
Roosevelt’s entire public life explained away by rejection by her husband also has its
roots in conversations with her sons, whose books contain a variety of misogynistic
points about their mother and her friends. Elliott Roosevelt calls her a “rejected woman”
(268) and a “dissatisfied, incomplete woman” who “had chosen not to be a man’s
woman” (130). “She had failed as a wife and mother. … She was constrained in a
marriage between two hopelessly incompatible people, unloved and largely unwanted”
(170). Thus, Elliott explains why ER emerges in the public realm, blamed for her
husband’s philandering, denied agency as the force behind the great accomplishments of
her own life. Lash tells us that ER “forge[d] a new personality at whose center were her
desires to love and her passion to be of use” with a focus on “spiritual emotions” (Lash
and Roosevelt 144). He thus raises ER above the earthly concerns of the everywoman
and the need for romance and intimacy. Nancy G. Isenberg criticizes Lash’s work as emblematic of the “eternal mother” and “the problematic nature of how women (or Woman) are portrayed in traditional biography” (107). For this historian, the mythological nature of a feminine ideal excludes that reality of ER’s life and that of other women subject to the same treatments around the virginal mother figure.

Figure 12 Jane Alexander and FDR (Edward Herrmann) in "Eleanor and Franklin: The White House Years" (1979)

This “sainthood” bestowed by Lash is not the whole story in *Eleanor and Franklin*, however. Another discourse present within the 1976 mini-series puts a different onus on Eleanor. One scene creates a meeting between the couple as teenagers at Uncle Teddy Roosevelt’s party. FDR (Ted Eccles) asks ER (Mackenzie Phillips) what she will do with all of her education after Allenswood: “I have a feeling you’re going to achieve great things in the world.” ER replies, “That’s my ambition,” something that FDR admires as quite different from the other young women at the party. “It’s refreshing to meet someone with ambition, a girl, I mean.” Young Eleanor tells him, “I think ambition
is a good thing to have. Don’t you?” The ambitions of an adult Eleanor are soon lost in the plot around her marriage, but this shows us a driven personality, in marked contrast to the image of the sainted woman. In fact, we could go further to show that Eleanor’s early ambitions were restricted by the conventional expectations of those around her, but the affair and FDR’s rejection allowed her to break free of those conventions. ER’s grandmother takes her out of school to “come out” in society, ending her education and forcing her into the world of balls and parties that she finds “horrid.” Eleanor is still different from the other girls, strongly stating her opinions; but after marriage, Franklin’s mother takes over their lives and stifles the younger woman’s opinions and ambitions. It is the older women who constrain the ambitious ER, until the affair allows her once again to act outside the household. All of this, however, is overshadowed by the import of the affair that bookends the entire drama. In The White House Years sequel, the relationship is once again front and center, and Eleanor even tells Louis Howe about what happened. The once ambitious ER is not prominent in these episodes, as her character falls in line with the “eyes and ears” service. In the final moments, she speaks with her daughter Anna about “the suffering I went through all those years ago,” putting in place the audience’s final image of a woman who “suffered” and thus became such an important figure for the American public. More recent online viewer comments zero in on this portrayal: “He liked the ladies and Eleanor was long suffering but strong enough to become his eyes, ears and legs up until his death” (Beverly). “Since the time the book was written historians have given us another slant on Eleanor. She was not the ‘long suffering’ wife as she is seen in this film. ... She had a very separate life that developed starting in the second decade of their marriage” (Netflix viewer). Other Netflix users also
comment with newer information about “her virtual abandonment [sic] of the President” or how her characterization is “so incredibly dull and makes her look like a crashing bore and a wet towel to boot.” The general impression is that this portrayal is too simplistic in its understanding of Eleanor’s motivations. Son James Roosevelt reinforces this view in a comment about the first TV movie: “She was portrayed mostly as a wronged and long-suffering wife, which, if true in part, was nevertheless only a small part of what she was” (313). Still, the sad, jilted woman of *Eleanor and Franklin* endures with an image still valued by dissatisfied spectators of *Hyde Park on Hudson* in 2013, when they recommend the 1976 production instead.

Later documentaries include interviews that reinforce the dominant discourse of *Eleanor and Franklin*, particularly with friends Trude Lash (widow of Joseph Lash), Edna Gurewitsch (widow of David Gurewitsch), and family members. In *We Remember Eleanor* in 1984, Trude Lash tells us that ER had a “great need for affection,” and Eleanor’s grandson John Boettinger continues that she, “learned to care out of her own need. She had known too little generosity, too little love in her own life.” Thus, she is needy from her husband’s rejection, leading her to public work. Edna Gurewitsch is more critical of ER in the “FDR” episode of the PBS show *The American Experience* in 1994, implying that the destruction of that normative marriage was not all about a saintly, wronged woman. Referring to his period of polio convalescence on a houseboat in Florida, Gurewitsch says, “She had abdicated her role as wife. She had. He invited her very many times to come down.” Here she chooses a political life over her husband’s needs, in a comment that, like many others, reflects something that Gurewitsch had no direct knowledge of back in the 1920s. She later refers to another non-normative role for
a wife: “Mrs. Roosevelt was a conscience. It’s not so pleasant to have someone saying you shouldn’t be doing this. You should be doing something better. It’s like your mother.” Here Gurewitsch implies that ER was not in a wifely role or an equal partnership with her husband, but a role that puts her in the same category as his mother Sara Delano Roosevelt, always portrayed as a very controlling individual.

![Figure 13 Jean Stapleton in "Eleanor: First Lady of the World" (1982)](image)

**Bad Mother**

Another means of queering Eleanor Roosevelt is by representing her as a bad mother, a woman who is not a natural at motherhood with her own children, so she must extend her womanly need to nurture to the rest of the world. This is clearly the message as she is shamed in the Emmy winning CBS television movie *Eleanor: First Lady of the World* (1982), now available on VHS and DVD. One might expect this to be a celebration of ER, and although its primary focus is on her accomplishments in the United Nations, it begins with packing up to leave the White House after FDR’s death.
Well-known TV actor Jean Stapleton plays Eleanor as her daughter Anna (Gail Strickland) urges her to retire from public life, immediately undercutting the value placed on ER’s life work. Anna says, “My God, do you have to be useful and saintly every minute?” After Eleanor’s response, “I don’t quite feel ready to be put out to pasture,” Anna continues, “For the first time in your life, you have time. You certainly had no time when we were growing up. Between your politics and your causes, there was precious little of you for any of us. . . . It’s not too late for your grandchildren. Some of them see you more as a national monument than as a grandmother.” Eleanor’s response is defensive, “Well, not having been a very good mother, I don’t suppose I’d be much better as a grandmother.” After a few moments, Anna shames her again. “You didn’t even cry when Pa died…. I am your only daughter, and I have never seen you cry.” Perhaps to show the audience that ER is not completely unlike other women, Anna is cruel and proceeds to make Eleanor cry. However, the script differentiates the saintly figure from *Eleanor and Franklin* as somehow unnatural. She later redeems herself by taking grandson Buzz (Jeffrey Marcus) to Paris with her to the next UN meeting, in this case making a compromise to include family with official duties, but the damage results from leading the whole production with the “bad mother” theme. This point is not unusual, as she herself noted in autobiographical material that she knew little about mothering left and much to nurses and her mother-in-law. Significantly though, the emphasis on her disinclination to mother sets her apart from the standard and familial narrative in ways that comments about FDR’s lack of fathering skills do not.

Again, Edna Gurewitsch criticizes ER in *The American Experience* episode on FDR: “I think she was totally inept when it came to dealing with children. She relied on
her mother-in-law and the various governesses ... She had never experienced mother love.” Before the title sequence in the Biography “Eleanor Roosevelt” episode (2000), an unknown person tells us, “She was a loving person. She may not have been loving enough for her husband, and that was a tragedy. She was tender to her friends. She may not have been tender enough for her sons and her daughter.” In this case, the documentary lets the audience know that she was both an unnatural wife and mother before the film begins in earnest, focusing on private failings. Later a segment with historian Geoffrey Ward softens this message: “Eleanor Roosevelt is often blamed for being a bad mother. Her husband was not a very good father.” However, this statement does not negate the previous discourse about ER as a bad mother, and nearer the end of the broadcast in a discussion of her sons’ failed marriages and business ventures, the narrator suggests, “Eleanor found a measure of personal happiness, but she was still troubled by her failure as a mother.” This message repeats in three different parts of the program, making sure that the audience understands that this point is crucial to how we understand Eleanor Roosevelt. This work centered on ER questions FDR’s parenting skills once, but this is not an issue that receives equal attention in documentaries on Franklin. In general, biographical films about women are more likely to include family dynamics as critical components to women’s accomplishments, while rarely addressing this for men in the same ways. This documentary also calls attention to historical queering of ER over these issues of wife and mother by addressing political opponents. “Eleanor’s activist role as First Lady became a campaign issue. Newsreels contrasted her to Mrs. Alf Landon [1936 Republican presidential candidate]. Mrs. Landon, Republicans assured voters, was a traditional wife and mother.” The narrator says this over footage of
Landon’s wife playing the harp and reading to children. Although this is the only documentary specifically to call attention to criticisms and comparisons to other normative women, one imagines that her detractors likely used these same kinds of images and messages as campaign issues.

The Ken Burns 14-hour-long documentary series *The Roosevelts: An Intimate History* takes a similar approach in 2014. Although in many ways avoiding the gendered characterizations of its predecessors when dealing with ER’s motivations and successfully interweaving Eleanor’s story with that of her Uncle Ted and husband Franklin, the subject of the “bad mother” is at issue in two different episodes. The narrator tells us, “Franklin delighted in his children. Eleanor seemed mostly puzzled by them,” and then ER (voiced by Meryl Streep) reads from her autobiography, “I had never had any interest in dolls or in little children, and I knew absolutely nothing about handling or feeding a baby.” Specifically, modern American culture typically queers girls who do not play with dolls as “tomboys” and women who go on to live outside of feminine norms. The choice of this text carries implications for our impressions of Eleanor as an adult. In a later episode, the narrator recalls that it is in her grandmother that Anna found “consistent, warm, spontaneous love, the kind of love Eleanor had never known when she was a girl and now found hard to provide to her own children.”

Although Geoffrey Ward briefly mentions FDR’s virtual abandonment of his children during the polio recovery time in Florida and Georgia, it does not have the same impact in light of the earlier messages that he “delighted in his children.” The normative expectations about women’s natural fulfillment through motherhood carry much heavier weight in how viewers see Eleanor in the world.
“Colored”

Historically, we know that many hated ER because of her work on issues of race and racism, as well as her concerns for the poor and working class. She was a target and scapegoat over the years, even with a Ku Klux Klan bounty on her head in the 1950s. Her stands on the practice of lynching or against barriers to African-Americans in the military in WWII placed her further outside of the normative matronly role, and some southern quarters especially reviled her during her lifetime. Queer theory shows us that a critique of “whiteness” is also a critique of the heteronormative, as it is the straight, white, middle-class, male ideal from which all other marginalized groups are measured. The stories of ER sitting in the middle of an aisle in the South when told that it was illegal to sit where she was on the Black side of the room, or her resignation from the Daughters of
the American Revolution after the organization denied Marian Anderson the right to sing in Constitution Hall and the subsequent concert on the Mall in Washington, are repeated in a number of documentaries as inclusive moments. What is telling in terms of changes in American society is that in the late twentieth century and the post-millennium, these anti-racist actions are normalizing. She is a civil rights leader largely revered for these activities rather than what happened in her own lifetime, with the extreme hatred and vulnerability she faced over these issues. ER is queered in historical context only by showing the extreme language used by opponents, as expressed in documentaries like 761st (2007), which focuses on the African-American tank battalion in WWII. It openly refers to their other name, “Eleanor Roosevelt’s Niggers.” HBO’s television movie The Tuskegee Airmen (2005) does not go that far, showing Eleanor (Rosemary Murphy) dropping by the airfield to go for a ride with a “colored pilot” as a means to get press coverage that would allow them to serve overseas. In a modern context, she is a hero for this work, and the film does not effectively call out her difference from accepted attitudes of the time. The on-screen moment that effectively queers her for today’s audiences is from Eleanor: In Her Own Words (1987). ER (Lee Remick) reads from a letter she has received. “I don’t need to be rude, but do you have colored blood in your family, as you seem to derive so much pleasure in associating with colored folk?” She answers simply: “I haven’t as yet discovered any colored blood, but of course if any of us go back far enough, I suppose we can find the same beginnings.” Marked as “colored” because of her associations, the non-white distinction effectively queers ER. The assumption is that naturally, biologically there must be something different to place her in that non-normative category. The Ken Burns documentary series is also able to work towards a
similar message to the audience by including a letter appearing in the Jackson, Mississippi *Daily News*: “It is blood on your hands, Mrs. Roosevelt. You have personally been proclaiming and practicing social equality at the White House and wherever you go.” As the narrator goes on to discuss the hundreds of thousands of African-Americans who moved north to work in factories during the war and subsequent race riots, viewers must pause to consider the words in the letter. The writer does not laud her for her activism. Instead, he blames her for advocating “social equality,” considering it the work of a traitor to her race. It is one of the few such jarring moments in a film that largely avoids contentious topics.

Both Roosevelts were also hated as “traitors to their class,” wealthy patricians who expanded the role of government and its leaders to care for and connect with the “common man” in the United States. While we see indications of this treatment of FDR, film and television rarely address this for Eleanor on-screen in a serious way. Documentaries often cover her 1935 visit into an Ohio coalmine with archival footage to show the breadth of the kind of travel and connections she made. A famous *New Yorker* cartoon spoofing that visit appears as a positive memory as she takes on the interests of some of the most poverty-stricken areas of the county, but at the time, the cartoon was not necessarily a celebration of her work. The coal miners appear in black face, an additional “colored” interest. This is another of Eleanor’s queered moments, differentiated from other white, upper-class women. Only one film deals with the cartoon’s impact on ER, *Eleanor Roosevelt: Close to Home*, the fundraising DVD available in the gift shop in Val-Kill, produced by the National Trust for Historic Preservation. Eleanor, voiced by Jane Alexander, the actor best known for portraying her
in *Eleanor and Franklin*, talks about the topic: “I was doing things that had not been done before. It was indicated to me that I should feel somewhat ashamed of that cartoon and there certainly was something the matter with a woman who wanted to see so much and to know so much.” Here we get an indication that in the 1930s, her activities drew much more cultural critique than is expressed in recent years. Airing this cartoon today without additional discussion does not adequately express the shaming intended at the time, connected to both the black face and low economic status of the men pictured.

![Figure 15 Rosemary Murphy and Laurence Fishburne in "The Tuskegee Airmen" (1995)](image)

**Asexual Victorian Woman**

By the late 1920s, the US had the highest divorce rate in the world, with one sixth of marriages ending in divorce (May 549) and a level of women’s political activism and professional visibility that would not be equaled until the 1970s (Smith-Rosenberg 34). However, stereotypes of “Victorians” ignore the vast cultural changes going on in the United States. In popular culture, references to the “Victorian woman” serve up images of a person who exists not only in the past but also in the present with a particular
mindset or set of values. This is generally a white, upper class woman who was in a financial position not to work outside the home and hires help inside the household to perform manual labor. Her husband is the powerful head of the nuclear family, leaving women with little responsibility or decision-making power, and plenty of leisure time. She is demure, lacking in sexual interest and has virtually no knowledge of sexual matters, instead forming romantic, non-sexual friendships with other women. The culture confines them not only in mind, but also in body, with a manner of dress that both hides and constricts. In his 1973 book review of Lash’s *Eleanor and Franklin*, Roger Daniels ends with, “For all her modernity, Eleanor was never, in the proper sense, liberated: she was, rather, the greatest of the Victorians” (137).

In what way was Eleanor a Victorian? No one could argue that ER’s political and social views were not progressive, that she acquiesced to FDR in matters of the home, or that she was not financially independent. What the writer likely means is that she was asexual, without an intimate life outside of marriage to a man, an assumption based on stereotypes placed on women of a certain age, especially one who was a widow and did not remarry. Joseph Lash’s conversation with daughter Anna, in which she recounts that Eleanor told her “sex was an ordeal to be borne,” became the basis for the idea that ER had no interest in sex or intimacy (211). Elliott talks about his mother as “repressed” (23) and states that after the birth of the youngest son, John, “My parents never again lived together as husband and wife” (81). He blames Franklin’s affair on ER’s “insistence on abstinence” (82) because of her lack of knowledge about birth control and tells readers that “the sexual side of her nature had never been aroused” (107). Son James is kinder but still speculates based on stereotypes: “Mother was a product of a Victorian background
and I have no doubt she dreaded the sexual side of marriage, if only because she knew nothing about it. She had been brought up so formally she was not able to give herself feely to a man” (97). In this way, ER becomes cold and unaffectionate, void of intimacy or passion in her life, queered in her lack of interest in “normal” relationships and sex with men. The ideal woman would not have left her husband’s bedroom for all those years, and after his death, the expectation was to find another man to marry to complete a woman’s life. An Amazon.com commenter on Eleanor and Franklin even tells us that this TV mini-series has its facts wrong: “Eleanor told Franklin in no uncertain terms, that she was DONE with sex and she moved into a separate bedroom. She also informed her daughter, (who thereafter felt sorry for her dad) that sexual intercourse was a thing to be merely endured” (Bagnolo). Two others on Amazon call her “cold” (Scott, dottie) and another even “vindictive” (Davis). ER biographer Blanche Wiesen Cook paints an entirely different picture and tells us that her subject was a lifelong member of the Birth Control League. She suggests that the children’s understanding of their parents’ bedroom arrangements has little to do with the goals of biographers and historians to uncover the real motivations and passions of women in the past (12).
This asexual spinster character is represented in different ways, some as simple as showing ER as cold and socially apart from others, as we see in *Bertie and Elizabeth* (2000). The PBS television drama includes the King and Queen of England’s visit to Hyde Park prior to WWII, and in this brief scene, ER (Irene Richards) sits slightly off to the side, unsmiling, while Bertie (James Wilby) leans towards Sara Delano Roosevelt and chats with her. This is an intentional misrepresentation of a cold Eleanor, since when viewing the actual archival footage of this very scene, a smiling ER leans towards the King, very much a part of the group with the gregarious FDR (see *Royal Family at War*). This very specific recreation of historical footage, the only appearance of the Roosevelts in this film, intentionally misrepresents Eleanor to fit a specific stereotype. NBC Emmy winner *FDR: The Last Year* (1980) illuminates Eleanor’s difference by contrasting her presence to the hyperfemininity of Lucy Mercer (Kim Hunter), as well as placing her in the role of the angry feminist who hates men, the worst kind of spinster. In the teleplay,
Based on the book by Jim Bishop, Lucy plays a pivotal role with numerous visits during the year before Franklin’s death. She comforts him, holding him to her bosom, kissing in the car and cuddling in bed together. This is a lover and a woman who fawns on FDR (Jason Robards), giggling at his jokes. She is the hegemonic picture of femininity, while Eleanor (Eileen Heckart) seems a bother, stopping in Franklin’s bedroom only to make a list of issues she wishes him to address. The two have a tense relationship in which FDR does not really listen to her political suggestions, and he actively deceives her to meet Lucy on several occasions. ER is critical, not supportive, and they are not very friendly to one another. Lucy, on the other hand, kisses him on the check, touches his shoulder like a lover, smiles at his jokes and looks on adoringly, not engaging in political discussion at all. When he mentions Stalin to her, she just smiles, indicating that this is how he likes his women. Near the end of the two hour television movie, FDR changes the subject from politics with Eleanor to suggest that after this term, they go away together to work in the Arabian Desert to help make it bloom. He appears to be holding out an olive branch, but ER does not take it: “What are you talking about? I have my work.” FDR makes a case that they go somewhere exotic and “get tan and run to fat.” Her response is angry: “There’s one thing I will not be, Franklin, not ever. I will not be your little China doll.” On the defensive, he tells her, “I never asked. I never wanted a doll of any sort, China, stuffed, carved, or ornamental. I dislike dolls.” However, Lucy’s presence contradicts this. She is, in fact, the doll he is now enjoying behind ER’s back, when Eleanor is not a doll of any kind. The film queers ER by specifically contrasting her to Lucy, who appears somewhat mindless, beautiful, and adoring, even many years younger than FDR. On the day of Franklin’s death in Warm Springs, a reporter asks, “Mrs. Roosevelt, may I ask
who designed the dress you’re wearing?” She says, “Why, I haven’t the slightest idea” and laughs, right before she is handed the note about FDR. Filmmakers set up this scene to show how different ER is from the coiffed, ultra-feminine Lucy, the two crosscut for contrast. After a brief shot of ER with the note, the camera lingers on Lucy crying in the car, asked to leave the presidential cottage. Then we never see Eleanor on screen again. The editing implies that Lucy is the true woman in grief, the real heterosexual partner here, while Eleanor is the cold, angry feminist who does not care about proper feminine fashion or supporting her husband as a wife in his last months of life. She certainly has no inclination to share his bed or loving kisses. While *Eleanor and Franklin* just a few years earlier had a sympathetic tone that favors ER over Franklin and his infidelities, this television movie portrays her in a more negative light, explaining Franklin’s affairs by focusing on the feminine woman Eleanor is not. A brief comment from the “FDR” *American Experience* episode reinforces this same approach as the narrator reads from an aunt’s letter, “Alas and lackaday, I just hate to have Eleanor look as she does. Since politics has become her choicest interest, all her charm has disappeared.”

This characterization of ER as the antithesis of the charming, feminized wife also finds traction in the 2014 Ken Burns documentary series *The Roosevelts: An Intimate History*. Writer Geoffrey Ward also often appears as an expert commentator, and here he explains why Lucy Mercer was so irresistible to Franklin, implying that she is everything that Eleanor is not:

Lucy Mercer was a beautiful, sweet natured, nice woman who adored the husband of her employer. She adored Franklin, and he had a deep need to find substitutes for the kind of unquestioning kind of adoration that his mother had given him…. She thought everything he did was marvelous.
As much as it tells us about Mercer and about FDR’s personality and relationship with his mother, it defines Eleanor as the antithesis: not beautiful, not sweet, and not adoring—not his “China doll.”

ER as the “Victorian woman” comes up most prominently in the Biography episode “Eleanor Roosevelt: A Restless Spirit,” as the documentary series debates questions of her sexuality in 1994. On one side, we are shown biographer Blanche Wiesen Cook and her feminist interpretation of a passionate life, on the other, History Channel commentator Steven Gillon. The subject of Eleanor’s relationship with Lorena Hickok has been a contentious one, with the major ER biographers like Blanche Wiesen Cook and Allida Black interpreting the love letters between these two women as expressions of emotional and physical love. They view the letters in the context of Eleanor’s life in a world of women in the 1920s, as her very closest friends were what we would now define as lesbian women, as was Hick. Closed to the public until ten years after Hickok’s death, the first scholar to discover them in the FDR Library was Doris Faber, who quickly wrote The Life of Lorena Hickok: E.R.’s Friend. The book portrays the two women as both physically unattractive and without affection from others, but claims that ER would never have crossed the line into a physical relationship with another woman. Cook wrote a scathing review of Faber’s book, prompting her to begin work on what would become a two-volume Eleanor biography. In 1998, Rodger Streitmatter transcribed a selection of three hundred out of the thousands of letters in Empty Without You: The Intimate Letters of Eleanor Roosevelt and Lorena Hickok, making these available to the public for the first time. As Dana L. Cloud notes, the A&E “Restless Spirit” program chooses the spectacle approach, sensationalizing a discussion
of ER’s sexual identity and making it about identity when it is impossible to say how a person from the past, who lived in a time when the social identity categories were quite different, would choose to publicly and privately place herself today. However, Gillon also queers Eleanor by naming her as a Victorian woman, a phrase that carries with it implications outside the normative modern woman: “A Victorian woman of that age, of which Eleanor Roosevelt was certainly one, tended to use language to express their affection for one another which today suggests physical intimacy, but in the context of the times may not have meant that at all.” ER came of age well after Queen Victoria’s death and transcended the confines of class, of race, of gender, of the heteropatriarchal nuclear family structure, but as a woman in her forties, who in 1933 was making more money than her husband, Gillon casts her as asexual, writing her lesbian friend long tomes of loving rhetoric—because she is an old-fashioned Victorian lady. His intention is clearly to negate questions of “why not?”; however, in a twentieth century context, this sort of discussion points out her difference as a woman who did not direct love to her husband, but instead to other women. Romantic love amongst some real, married Victorian women did exist, but not likely in the late 1920s and early 1930s, and certainly not in the 1990s.

If Eleanor Roosevelt was a bisexual, she certainly went to great lengths to see that we would never find out. My own feeling is at this point, we don’t know what the extent of many of these relationships were, whether they were consummated or they went beyond just an emotional attachment or not. I think it’s very unlikely that given the evidence that exists that we’ll ever know.

Cook is very careful not to name ER as “lesbian,” as a love of a woman does not translate into an identity choice, and it is Gillon who suggests that she may be “bisexual,” which is of course a queering of a different stripe. Cloud concludes that this documentary asks the
wrong question for shock value—was she queer?—rather than examining how her public memory “can trouble the assumptions of heteronormativity” (39).

Figure 17 Lorena Hickok

A Queer Independent Life

A lot of people have always portrayed Eleanor Roosevelt as really lonely and unhappy without a private life of her own. I think the thing that is very controversial in my book is that I suggest that she had a very full life and a very full private life. … The young people [grandchildren and great-grandchildren] seem to like the book and accept that it is possible that Eleanor Roosevelt had a passionate life even though they have an image of her, as we all have had, of a very austere and cold and unhappy woman.

Discussing Volume One of her ER biography on C-Span’s Booknotes in 1993, Blanche Wiesen Cook explains the political nature of her biographical work that challenges what women are supposed to be—not passionate, powerful, ambitious, or even political. Cook, celebrated with a panel at the 2010 American Historical Association meeting for her breakthroughs in feminist biography, looks at lives that include the same kind of
inspirations for women that others explore for men. Mentors, lovers, and intimate friends become crucial to the story that expands beyond the normative wife and mother roles or those that box women’s stories into how they do not fit those ideals. Instead, to state difference as a positive or even neutral position can be a radical act. Cook does this as the foil to Steven Gillon on Biography’s “Eleanor Roosevelt: A Restless Spirit.” She posits, “When Eleanor Roosevelt writes to Lorena Hickok, ‘I cannot wait for your return so I can lie down beside you and take you in my arms,’ I don’t think that’s a rhetorical Victorian flourish. I think that’s real.” This is “queer” in the traditional sense, delineating an alternate emotional or sexual preference that does not conform to the heteronormative, male defined world. However, Cook stops short of defining Eleanor’s sexual identity.

The American Experience episode “Eleanor Roosevelt” (2000) goes further to present not a “he said” (Gillon)/“she said” (Cook) scenario, but structures the documentary to allow Cook more time to develop a picture of ER as an independent, powerful woman who lives largely on her own terms. This is not just about sexuality, but a whole life. Cook talks about the death of Eleanor’s Grandmother Hall the year after the Mercer affair, when ER writes about how her Grandmother could have been a painter and done more with her life. “It’s very clear to her that being a devoted wife and a devoted mother is not enough. Eleanor Roosevelt decides she is going to do everything possible with her life. She’s going to live a full life.” This is a very different woman than the one who either serves her husband or acts out of a lack in the home. This is a picture of ER reevaluating her life and moving forward with agency, rather than as a dependent reaction to her husband. Allida Black’s review of the documentary in The Journal of American History also finds this approach valuable. “It skillfully negates the image of ER as a
woman of sorrow who turned to the world for love when she could find none in her own home. Instead, we see ER building friendships, forging political alliances, and redefining herself in the process” (1205). If Joseph Lash and *Eleanor and Franklin* in 1976 shifted the paradigm from model wife and saint to suffering saint, Cook, and by extension this *American Experience* documentary, fractures that paradigm. A radical revisiting of Eleanor’s life punctures the interpretation of a lonely woman without aspirations of her own. The discourse around the Hickok letters also points viewers to the effects of an intimate friendship, regardless of what else it might have been. Granddaughter Nina Roosevelt Gibson explains, “I have no idea whether Lorena Hickok had a homosexual relationship with my grandmother or not. My feeling about that is kind of, who cares? They were very good friends and if they could make each other happy in any way, then that’s what’s important.” Grandson Franklin D. Roosevelt III adds, “It shows that she was certainly capable of a very intense emotional relationship and expressing great love and being there for someone else and expecting someone else to be there for her.” Even historian Geoffrey Ward, who has been publicly somewhat dismissive of Cook, concludes: “Hickok was entirely and totally devoted to her and that Mrs. Roosevelt had never had in her life. No one else had been fully devoted to her, not her parents, not her husband, not her children, not her grandmother.” Before the film moves on to discuss Hickok’s role in working with ER’s press strategy, Trude Lash also makes an appearance, as does Edna Gurewitsch, two older women whose husbands were Eleanor’s friends and became friends with her as well. As shown above, they often appear in documentaries to voice opinions about her (even though often not from personal experience). Here, Lash tells us: “Hick was a lesbian and Mrs. Roosevelt was very
affectionate and quite demonstrative, not only Hick, to other women, to men. She showed her warmth. She definitely was not a lesbian.” Lash attempts to put Mrs. Roosevelt’s personal life in the normative box by naming her as heterosexual, but the more dominant discourse considers a queer possibility. By making this a possibility, a “what if?,” by not automatically dismissing a sexual life with either another woman, ER comes out of these discussions a much fuller character. The film’s producer, Kathryn Dietz, summarizes this comprehensive approach:

We think we know Eleanor Roosevelt because she’s so familiar, but usually her story is woven into the stories of her uncle, Theodore Roosevelt, or of her husband. But she was active in politics earlier than Franklin and lived beyond him, with the last years of her life her most productive. People will be surprised at how tough and how political she was and what a rich personal life she had. (Riechers)

This documentary set a new tone for a new century of interpreting Eleanor Roosevelt’s life in ways that are more complex.

Figure 18 Eleanor Roosevelt, Marion Dickerman, and Nancy Cook (1926)
The Roosevelts in 2014 thus also takes Eleanor’s whole life seriously, interweaving it with the stories of the famous men in her family, but presenting her import with equal weight. Although the documentary series discusses ER’s lonely childhood and the Lucy Mercer affair, these factors do not shape the story such that Eleanor is a victim defined only to her reactions as a suffering wife, for example. Before the Mercer affair, this documentary presents ER’s work during WWI for the Red Cross and her inspection of a mental hospital for shell-shocked soldiers. “The war liberated all of what Eleanor called her ‘executive ability.’ … She was ready to resume a life of her own, to find a new kind of fulfillment on her own terms.” When they move back to New York, this wartime work moves her to join the League of Women Voters and begin a life in politics with the women she meets. Then she receives a phone call from Nancy Cook asking her to work in the Women’s Division of the Democratic Party. Louis Howe and FDR agree that this would help keep the Roosevelt name alive politically, but it is Eleanor’s independent activity that they support, not ER doing so merely to help her husband. Here we see the influence of ER biographer Blanche Wiesen Cook, interviewed in this segment, whose work contributes to how this series presents Eleanor’s story as separate, yet intertwined, with FDR before polio and after his death. However, the Burns/Ward collaboration illustrates that what we now see as a feminist approach to Eleanor Roosevelt’s life does not necessarily queer her in the same way as the earlier Sue Williams documentary. Competing discourses vie for viewers’ attentions. The narrator refers to Esther Lape and Elizabeth Read as “partners … committed to one another.” Nancy Cook and Marion Dickerman photographs show them in neckties, the images lingered upon as the voiceover tells us that some called ER’s new friends “female
impersonators.” It is clear that the audience is to notice this presentation of non-normative gender in the 1920s amongst Eleanor’s closest friends. However, Lorena Hickok does not receive the same treatment. Doris Kearns Goodwin tells us that, “Lorena fell in love with Eleanor” as the first person who really loved ER alone, but that is it. There is no discussion of Eleanor’s feelings about Hick, no mention of their thousands of ardent letters, no naming of Hick’s sexual orientation, no interview with Blanche Cook in this segment. The photographs chosen to represent Hick are those that do not necessarily indicate anything non-normative about her, as do the Cook/Dickerman images utilized. The omission is surprising, even in the Burns documentary style that does not present competing interpretations of evidence. Burns answers this question in a public talk he gave in Chicago in September 2014:

I assume when you say a relationship you are assuming that there was a sexual relationship between Eleanor Roosevelt and Lorena Hickok. We have no evidence whatsoever of that, and none of the historians and experts believe it. This is an intimate [look at the Roosevelts] and not a tabloid, and we just don’t know. … We have to be very careful because sometimes we want to read into things that aren’t there. (Maxwell)

One must assume by “historians,” Burns refers to his collaborator Geoffrey Ward, not to historians like Cook, Black, Beasley, and others. Regardless of Ward’s interpretation of Eleanor as a “Victorian woman,” the decision not to include a suggestion that ER may have been in love with or engaged in sexual activity with another woman is one that places the 2014 documentary out of sync with academic and popular culture trends of its time. It effectively normalizes the sexuality of the woman whose life that it has so successfully presented as independent from her husband and family, but cannot go further to entertain the possibility that this also included non-normative relationships with a woman, or even with a younger man (bodyguard Earl Miller in New York). Thus, we still
do not get a view of ER’s private life in the same way, for example, that Daisy Suckley appears as FDR’s confidant. In the Burns documentary, she is identified as an emotional intimate whose letters are voiced throughout the presentation; in that same way, Hick’s letters may have enriched our understanding of Eleanor. To some, like lesbian history scholar Lillian Faderman, the exclusion of the possibility of a romance with Hickok is “inexcusable” (Maxwell) and may represent an intentional suppression to fit the filmmakers’ understandings of the construction of gender and sexuality in our own time.

Figure 19 Cherry Jones (ER) and Hilary Swank (Amelia) in “Amelia” (2009)

Fictional narratives produced in the last several years after *Warm Springs* (2005), that was most interested in a story of a perfect marriage, appear to accept the queer Eleanor, the woman who lives a private life quite separate from her husband. There is a definite shift in the public’s understanding of who Eleanor Roosevelt is and was in the world. This includes major theatrical releases *Amelia* (2009), *J. Edgar* (2011), *Hyde Park on Hudson* (2012), a *Saturday Night Live* sketch (2011), and two independent films by women who appropriate ER in *History Lessons* (2000) and *The Honeymoon Years of Eleanor Roosevelt and Lorena Hickok* (2005). The feature about Amelia Earhart shows
Amelia (Hilary Swank) as a woman in charge of her marriage and open to heterosexual affairs, but it also subtly includes ER to hint at Amelia's attractiveness to other women. The historical occasion when Amelia took Eleanor for a ride up above Washington, DC one evening begins here with a dinner at which Amelia pays her a compliment: "The wrong Roosevelt got elected." ER (Cherry Jones) briefly pilots the plane over the dark sky and lights of the city, and when they have landed, she tells the flyer somewhat breathlessly, "I shall never, ever forget this night." Amelia's husband GP Putnam (Richard Gere) hears this and says, "She seems quite taken with you." Amelia adds, "And vice versa." This cinematically beautiful scene and the dialogue insert a subtext of attraction between the two, the "what if?" that the A&E "Eleanor Roosevelt" documentary allowed in 2000. Online commenters do not mention it, but it is the kind of placement that is likely noticed by viewers open to or knowledgeable about this interpretation of the lives of both of these women. Still, other audiences who would not pick up the cues may virtually ignore the material. This is layered by the fact that actor Cherry Jones, who plays ER, identifies as a lesbian. Another clue exists in the character of a young Gore Vidal (William Cuddy), who appears as a boy in the film while his father Gene Vidal (Ewan McGregor) has an affair with Amelia. Gay icon Gore wrote about the affair in his memoir, *Point to Point Navigation*, as well as speculating on his friend Eleanor's private life in other essays, and this plot includes a moment with Amelia lobbying with ER for Gene's position as the country's first Director of Air Commerce.
The personage of Eleanor does not appear as a physical character in Golden Globe nominated *J. Edgar* (2011), but her presence is critical to this film’s interpretation of the life of FBI director J. Edgar Hoover and to changing popular culture impressions of her private life. This is a man historically understood to despise ER, compiling one of the largest FBI files on any individual, from her 1920s activities promoting the World Court, to “naïve” associations with Communist sympathizing youth organizations, to the anti-lynching and anti-racism work that dominates the bulk of the file up until her death. These documents, now available to the public, include his personal writing in the margins with comments like “this old hen” and “this old cow” (*Booknotes*, 1993). The film recreates a scene in which Hoover (Leonardo DiCaprio) holds the transcript supposedly of an audio recording of ER in an “intimate moment” with a male Communist in a hotel room. There are two shocking elements here—one that ER is having sex with a man who is not her husband, but the bigger impact comes from the fact that the Director of the FBI is bugging the hotel rooms of the First Lady and then using that information as leverage to force the President (David A. Cooper) to give him even wider powers. What we know
after the Freedom of Information Act is that this was a tape of Joseph Lash and his then
girlfriend Trude Lash using ER’s hotel room for an “intimate moment.” Within the
context of the film, this scene establishes a very trusting relationship between Hoover and
his new right-hand-man Clyde Tolson (Armie Hammer), who would become his lifelong
companion and, as some have suggested, lover. This is the first piece of confidential
information from his secret files that he would then routinely share with Tolson, who
wields an attraction that Hoover does not yet understand. It also sets up the next scene in
which they discuss ER in a different light, connecting Eleanor to themes of sex, love, and
hidden desires for the two men. Hoover holds a letter in his hand and reads it aloud to
Tolson:

“Only eight more days. Funny how even the dearest face will fade away in time.
Most clearly I remember your eyes with a sort of teasing smile in them and the
feeling of the soft spot just northeast of the corner of your mouth against my lips.”
It’s a letter from Lorena Hickok, the White House reporter with the bad breath to
Mrs. Roosevelt…. I accused her of having an affair with a man and old horse face
is having an affair with Mrs. Bad Breath. Whoa. Can you believe it?

Tolson merely smiles, but takes this as a sign that Hoover may be interested in intimacy
of this kind with him. The quoted text comes from actual letters between ER and Hick,
and we can see the text used as an indexical device to strengthen the audience’s
acceptance of Hoover’s sexuality. He is reading letters from this same time period that
contain homoerotic elements, adding historical legitimacy to this portrayal. What the
audience does not know at this point is the enormous impact of Hick and Eleanor’s
voices in these letters as they express the desires of these two men, perhaps the feelings
that they are not able to express to one another as openly and a symbol of hidden
sexuality. The film ends with Tolson finding ER’s confidential file in Hoover’s bedroom
on the day of J. Edgar’s death, the camera zooming in on the cover page as a form of
historical proof of its existence. After covering up the intimacy of Hoover’s naked torso on the floor, Clyde silently reads that same letter while Hoover’s voiceover does the same. Fade to black. Screenwriter Dustin Lance Black, best known for his Oscar winning feature on gay activist Harvey Milk (Milk, 2008), depicts Eleanor Roosevelt, whom the world assumed was a Hoover nemesis, as his model of a loving, alternative relationship. It is a radical revision of the historical record, taking the silences, gossip, and winks of the past to reconstruct a new vision of queer history. “What if?”

J. Edgar audience reactions online are mixed, falling along lines of who appreciates this construction of a private life. “TheUnknown837-1” comments on IMDb that Black “more or less writes this story more as a vessel for a homosexual romance and rights message,” representing this recognition by many viewers. Some, like “bikerhiker46” call it a “piece of Hollywood garbage.” Few mention the key role of ER here, although some, like “dierregi” indicate that queering historical private lives is not of interest to a public who now accepts this as a possibility: “Eleanor Roosevelt was a lesbian? Who cares anymore?” The majority of comments on IMDb, amazon.com, Rotten Tomatoes, and other online movie sites do care, whether they see this as a positive or a negative development.
Black humanizes J. Edgar Hoover, a man some consider a monster for his blackmail of presidents and other figures, but a different sort of humanizing drew outrage from many reviewers and audience members of the 2012 British film *Hyde Park on Hudson*. In this comedic biopic, the mythic image of Franklin Roosevelt (Bill Murray) is tarnished by the suggestion of sexual affairs with not only Lucy Mercer, but secretary Missy LeHand (Elizabeth Marvel) and distant cousin Daisy Suckley (Laura Linney) as they approach the weekend when the King (Samuel West) and Queen of England (Olivia Colman) will be visiting Hyde Park. However, it is not just the suggestion of FDR’s numerous female companions, but also the lack of respect for the mountain of hagiography that usually accompanies depictions of FDR. This is Bill Murray, a comedian, rather than an esteemed dramatic actor, and early on in the script, Franklin drives the adoring and pliable Daisy out to an isolated field where he persuades her to masturbate him, the car bouncing along. One gets the impression that this is her first time
performing the act, and she is in love, still ignorant of the other simultaneous mistresses. Director Roger Michell explains in the DVD audio commentary: “One of the radical things about this script was that this rather intimate event happens quite early in the movie and rather jolts everybody's expectation about what kind of film they're watching.” “What if?” “Why not?” The scene is quite intentional, and the whole of the film wraps around issues of the public and the private, the lives that the President, First Lady, King, and Queen all lead not only behind closed doors, but also in plain view. The public did not know about FDR’s inability to walk, and the press was complicit in keeping it a secret. There was also an agreement to keep the not-so-normative personal lives from the citizenry. As the King and Queen notice Franklin being carried from the front of the house after greeting the royals, around the side to be placed in his study, Daisy says, “And everyone pretended, as usual, not to notice anything.” She refers not only to polio, but also to household arrangements that become apparent to visitors, who say nothing. Later Daisy, the sometimes narrator, talks about FDR’s failing health during the war and how the press ignores this as well: “Everyone still looking to him, still seeing whatever it was they wanted to see. In a time, not so very long ago, when the world still allowed itself secrets, Franklin Roosevelt was mine.” This film is about those secrets and makes the audience think about whether today’s ideal of transparency, combined with intense interest in the details of every aspect of the lives of public officials, is a good thing or a bad thing. It asks us to consider FDR, this towering figure in American history, yet a man in a wheelchair with a wife who did not live in the same house, and what we might have lost without the mirages and deceptions.
At the same time Franklin’s portrayal is lecherous and misogynistic when it comes to how he treats Daisy and Missy, he is also kind and levelheaded. His superlative public self leads the nation and advises the King, while his private self is another matter. Eleanor’s (Olivia Williams) representation is demanding, shrewd, not so kind. It is clear that Hick is the most important person in her life, not FDR, as ER mentions “Hick says” several times, driving home her significance to the audience. Daisy explains in voiceover, “Hick was short for Lorena Hickok, one of these friends of Eleanor’s Franklin called ‘she-men.’” Later Missy tells Daisy, “It wasn’t Eleanor who abandoned him. She caught him…. Eleanor is realistic.” Thus, the onus is on FDR, without blame to ER for building this separate life. The film extends its arguments about what others knew and kept to themselves with a conversation as a royal aide (Andrew Havill) prepares Bertie and Elizabeth for their visit to Hyde Park:

Aide: “You’ll be staying in the Roosevelt house, sir. In fact, it’s the President’s mother’s house, and she will officially be your hostess.”

Queen: “Where is the President’s house?”

Aide: “This is where he lives.”

King: “With his mother? He doesn’t have a house?”

Aide: “He has a room.”

Queen: “And his wife?”

Aide: “She lives in another house, hers, which she shares with other women. They make furniture. The furniture … they make it. They’re couples. They’re the sort who like each other.”

(During the Depression, Nancy Cook, Marion Dickerman, and ER started a furniture factory at Val-Kill next to the cottage to provide jobs for local men.)

Thus, the script again presents a queer Eleanor and respects this interpretation without making a spectacle of the possibility. ER and FDR are portrayed as a couple who comes together over politics, and although quite amiable with one another, their separate living
arrangements are driven home when Missy mentions that the King’s brother had just met with Hitler. ER responds, “And this is the family we’re having in our house for the weekend?” Franklin’s next line makes the situation clear: “You don’t even live here,” as does ER’s follow up, “I’m staying the night. At least that’s what I told your mother.”

Thus, the film openly acknowledges the separate lives, especially in addition to Eleanor’s dialogue about what Hick thinks about the King and Queen, her absence explained by her work on the royal visit in Washington, DC the day before. Cinematically, the production never frames FDR and ER together, keeping them physically separated even in the same shot. In audio commentary, we also learn that a deleted scene involved the King and Queen disturbed that evening by the President leaving to meet Missy at Top Cottage and Nancy and Marion picking up ER to head to Val-Kill for the night. Just as the filmmakers interpret the historical evidence about FDR’s affairs, they also present an interpretation of ER’s private life. Director Michell explains in commentary over a scene in which Eleanor is talking about Hick and puts her hand on Franklin’s shoulder, as would an intimate: “Eleanor and FDR’s marriage obviously has been much written about and probably still a mystery to a certain extent. I think Richard’s script at this moment gives that mystery some respect, but they were a partnership. It was an incredible union, wasn’t it?” The presentation of Franklin’s nonchalance about his women seems to have provoked much of the ire from critics and viewers, while the implications for ER’s life were much less of a focus.

For some, the assumptions based on Daisy’s diary and letters, published by Geoffrey Ward in Closest Companion: The Unknown Story of the Intimate Friendship

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Between Franklin Roosevelt and Margaret Suckley in 1995, were a contentious matter.

Hyde Park Director Roger Michell says the film’s take on the relationship:

is surmise. The writer, Richard Nelson, has made this up, if you like, but he’s made it up on the basis of a pretty convincing body of evidence, and there’s no doubt that the President had many, many relationships with many women. Some of them were consummated in some kind of way. (DVD commentary)

This “convincing body of evidence” (the letters and diary) is not interpreted by Ward as a physical relationship, although the filmmakers do understand some of the text that way, including passages where Daisy writes almost orgasmically about FDR. Again, the DVD commentary provides critical insight into the nature of the biographical film and interpretation of historical evidence. Michell is discussing the characters of the King and Queen and how different these people are from those in The King's Speech, released not long before Hyde Park on Hudson:

Any of these things are fictions in a way. All historical drama is fiction. We don’t really know what these people really said to each other behind closed doors. It’s all surmise. It’s all a version. It’s all a construction, an imaginative response to what historical facts we know, but to see this as being a definitive portrait of a king and a queen is crazy and unintended.

He drives home the constructed nature of all historical films and characters based on real people. These are all interpretations that change with knowledge, with changes in popular culture and our understandings of the normative over time.

One is reminded of Joseph Lash’s Eleanor and Franklin book again when he tells readers, “Occasionally in later life Eleanor discussed it [the Mercer affair] with a few of her closest friends, including the writer of this book, when she saw they were puzzled by some of her domestic arrangements” (220). Thus, we know that those closest to her did have conversations at the time about living separately from her husband, but a 1973
review of Lash’s book is also revealing. In *Reviews in American History*, Roger Daniels argues with the writer:

> Obviously, some of the Roosevelt’s ‘domestic arrangements’ were also affected by infantile paralysis which apparently made sexual relations difficult if not impossible…. Surely some of the stresses of the marriage, which Eleanor attributed to the Mercer affair, may have stemmed from this. (134)

Daniels does his best to normalize the marriage, and thus Eleanor herself, with this proclamation. This sounds quite similar to Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. in 1966, arguing to save FDR’s reputation before the public largely accepted the Mercer affair. In the October issue of *Ladies Home Journal*, the article teases, “You’re read sensational stories about this ‘love affair.’ Here, finally, a distinguished historian tells what really happened.” Schlesinger, who here could be just as easily talking about ER/Hick letters, says: “Truth in such matters is hard to establish…. It is essential to remember, too, that we are dealing with the standards of another day. Franklin Roosevelt and Lucy Mercer were reared in the last years of the Victorian era…. Theirs was not a love affair in the modern manner” (“Romance”). In 1980, he uses the same arguments: “Eleanor Roosevelt and Lorena Hickok were both children of the Victorian age. Their correspondence, with its romantic avowals and physical references, fits into a well-established tradition. These were wounded women, doomed by chaotic childhoods to the unceasing quest for unattainable emotional security” (“Interesting”). More recently, Geoffrey Ward uses the same kinds of arguments concerning both Daisy Suckley and Eleanor Roosevelt—that these were Victorian women, and thus we cannot assume sexual involvement. In an interview with *The Washington Post*, Ward describes the FDR/Daisy situation: “His relationship with her was an extremely old-fashioned, very decorous sort of 19th century they wrote each other letters and may have kissed once, in a car on a hilltop”
(Henneberger). “She was in love with him the way a schoolgirl is in love with a much older person” (FDR’s Great Secret). Moreover, about Eleanor, “Here I confess that I am myself indulging in pure speculation. It is hard for me to believe that Mrs. Roosevelt would ever have slept with anyone other than the man to whom she had resolved to remain married” (“Outing”). In all of these cases, the writers “queer” their subjects as individuals who did not have the same romantic and sexual interests as a person does today, and although this could have been the case, it simplifies a “Victorian” existence outside the bounds of normalized emotions and relationships.

The point is that over time, both historians and filmmakers interpret information in varying ways, sometimes making the evidence fit into the heteronormative, until a time when public understandings of these lives have reached a tipping point. FDR’s affair with Lucy Mercer is now historical “fact.” For many recent feminists and filmmakers, Eleanor Roosevelt led a very separate social life, quite queer, regardless of any sexual activity that we will likely never know about. This is also the view of some Hyde Park on Hudson viewers, and although the majority of thousands of online comments focus on Murray’s performance, the problems with combining farce with historical drama, and how different this picture is of FDR than anything that precedes it, some also discuss the depiction of Eleanor. As noted above, while the film queers her family life, it also harkens back to the “cold” stereotypes of years before, and we do not see any of her brilliance or dedication to political causes. Sarah Ksiazek refers to “Eleanor Roosevelt, who is portrayed as a direct, brash woman”; Henry Drake to “Here, she’s merely an irritable quasi new-age ditz”; Edward Davidson says, “Eleanor Roosevelt is reduced to a cold, severe figure;” and Kimberly C. asks, “Really not sure … why one of the most intelligent and
compassionate First Ladies was portrayed as a spiteful bitch.” Although the role of ER is largely ignored in reviews, filmmakers do not treat her personal life in a way that updates to her on-screen personality. Some reviewers also make the leap from the film’s understanding of ER’s personal life to write about her perceived femininity quotient: Pamela Zoslov comments on “an unusually attractive masculine-suffragist version of Eleanor”; Rodrigo Perez to “semi-butch Eleanor”; and Laura Clifford to “Eleanor as a bull dyke anti-royal.” As viewers queer ER in terms of sexuality, they also queer her gender performance, especially in contrast to the very mousey character of Daisy, who looks on adoringly at FDR no matter how she is treated. Independent and “lesbian” becomes “butch” and “masculine” because ER does not run after FDR in the same way that Missy and Daisy attend to his every need (both sexual and otherwise).

Figure 22 Helen Mirren as ER with Hitler (Taran Killam) in a "Saturday Night Live" sketch (2011)
In *Hyde Park*, Franklin is the focus, and ER’s character is merely an occasional visitor to the scene. However, a 2011 sketch on NBC’s *Saturday Night Live* completely takes the paradigm of this marital partnership and flips it on its head. In this spoof, Eleanor (Helen Mirren) is the brilliant, strategic politician who conjures up the idea that FDR (Bill Hader) should fake polio in order to get him elected, and then starts WWII to make him a war hero. She is in control of Hitler (Taran Killam) and while naked in the bathtub, phones Hirohito to order the bombing of Pearl Harbor. What makes this farce more comedic is a historian who interrupts the drama to question the accuracy of this depiction. He does so again when Marilyn Monroe (Abby Elliott) appears and kisses not FDR, but Eleanor, in a passionate embrace. He rolls his eyes and tells the audience, “Even if Eleanor Roosevelt was a lesbian, it’s highly unlikely she had an affair with Marilyn Monroe, who was five at the time.” Next, the show’s producer appears on screen: “When I heard lesbian, you know I had to run with it, and as for Marilyn, I saw pics with the women Eleanor was really friends with. Woof, woof. You’re welcome!” The show thus manages to queer ER as the power behind the world’s leaders (men) and make her attractive to women in the way that *Hyde Park* made FDR a magnet, but it also sexualizes her with the suggestion that the only reason a relationship between two women should be portrayed is if it entertains male sexual fantasies. At the same time, it calls direct attention to these elements, when both the historian and producer characters break in to alert viewers to these extreme historical reconstructions, adjusted to meet audience desires. In the end, the announcer says “10% accurate, but 20% entertaining.” *Saturday Night Live* is all about farce, and the viewing audience recognizes this as such, but it also shows how far popular culture’s views of ER have expanded in scope. The sketch was an
opportunity for Helen Mirren, most often associated with serious historical drama, to enjoy a comedic role that fits her acting profile.

In light of the SNL sketch, the two productions by lesbian identified artists do not go nearly as far. However, these are both serious attempts to reconstruct queer history for women from images, texts and hints from the past, using Eleanor Roosevelt as the vessel for these recreations. *History Lessons* (2000) from experimental filmmaker Barbara Hammer opens with archival footage of ER speaking to a group of women, and this is intercut with black and white scenes of women talking about lesbianism, indicating that ER is addressing the “First Lesbian Conference.” She thus answers questions about ER’s sexual identity by showing us the evidence, as the appropriated footage claims Eleanor not only as someone who historically affirmed a lesbian identity; she was a political activist around these issues as well. This segment of Hammer’s film is very effective in its re-appropriation and subversion of traditional historical “evidence,” and these issues
of reconstructing missing women’s history are longtime goals of Hammer’s filmmaking. “I’m not trying to play a joke on the audience; I give them much more credit than that. If anything I’m trying to expose the joke that history plays on us. ... *History Lessons* is the archival ‘Mama’ that recoups some of our missing history” (Handelman). She does this here by implying a lesbian connection to a variety of archival sources and stock footage—women in the military, early Edison shots, sex education and stag films, and early pornography. It all starts with a welcome from ER, digitally altering her voice to say “First Lesbian Conference” instead of the original “First Women’s Conference.”

Marjorie Conn’s play *The Honeymoon Years of Eleanor Roosevelt and Lorena Hickok* makes similar claims to “keeping lesbian history alive and visible” (back cover) and “recording and restoring the lives of lesbians, lives which have been all too often erased from history” (vii). Released online on Vimeo, the live performance of the one-woman show focuses on Lorena Hickok, identified as “the lover of Eleanor Roosevelt,” as she thinks back on the early years of her relationship with ER. Conn plays with “what if?” to expand on the material available from the real thousands of letters between the two women and makes an alternative interpretation of their car trips together, including their “first honeymoon” to upstate New York and “second honeymoon” trip west. In San Francisco, they are “two middle-aged women in a city of love,” as Hick reads from the letters and some of ER’s articles and columns to create a more intimate context for everything that is said. Some of the letters she reads are fictional as well, part of the recreating process required to present this alternative history to lesbian audiences today. This is what the relationship *may have been* like, without the existence of negating evidence to the contrary. Conn ends the monologue with the following, romantic text: “I
knew she was meant for greatness. I am her refuge, the woman behind the woman, the First Lady’s lady, or she-man. She has my complete emotional support. I love her unconditionally.” Referencing FDR’s “she-man” designation from the historical record, this is Conn’s Eleanor and Hick, a separate, queer life taking the additional step to imagine a loving relationship, a historical model that she would like to be able to find in the historical record, but cannot.

**Conclusion**

Few American women rival Eleanor Roosevelt either in her public political presence and power to inspire or in number of appearances as a character or subject in film and television over the past seventy years. A woman who manipulated the media in her own lifetime, this legacy long continues in on-screen representations of her life, while new biographic investigations and feminist approaches to existing material substantially change the ways that she is presented over time to audiences. This paper demonstrates the subjective and constructed nature of biopics, docudramas, and even documentaries by examining how issues of gender are approached by both depictions that normalize the personage of Eleanor Roosevelt or those that queer her, focusing on ER as “other” in comparison to normative models of femininity, and by extension, sexuality, race, and class. The “natural” ideals around marriage and motherhood dominate in early years, later joined by new feminist models that also seek to normalize her marriage. Although considered “ugly” in most commentary, a status that historically allowed her to operate outside of the traditional feminine in some ways, a limited number of portrayals also normalize her by treating her like any other woman, sexualized and infantilized. Other films queer her by depicting her as unlike normative women: unhappy and unfulfilled within her marriage and thus
driven to good works in the world; a bad mother who expresses nurturing to others outside her family; non-white or “colored” in her stands against racism; an asexual Victorian woman who is either cold with men or naïve in relationships with women; or more queer in the traditional sense, a woman with a life outside of home and family, sometimes with a very full personal life as well. New trends reveal themselves from decade to decade, but there are some surprises. *Warm Springs* in 2005 contains an ER character who is the perfect wife to her polio-stricken husband, reminiscent of *Sunrise of Campobello* in 1960, and *The Roosevelts: An Intimate History* in 2014 omits the suggestion that ER may have been romantically involved with Lorena Hickok. In an era when the movies create public history for most viewers, their online comments are likely to support the dominant discourses found within these films and TV shows, while others have prior knowledge of the work of other historians or additional popular culture discussions may question these portrayals. Some viewers will also identify the subtexts, underlying themes, and messages that may require a specific background or experience to identify.

In *Screening History*, Gore Vidal writes about the importance of the movies as the way that most Americans learn their history, referencing the films he had seen as a boy: “We knew what the principals looked and sounded like. We had been there with them” (17). The audience feels as if they are now intimately acquainted with that character–her look, voice, family life, and what she thought about marriage and career. The cultural context that also reflects the time of the film’s production becomes history for viewers, and the dominant discourses around gender and sexuality, class, race and more, along with the dissenting voices, come through on closer examination. Today’s Eleanor is not merely an extension of her husband, the eyes and ears of the President of the United States, nor his jilted wife, or even a saint. Biographers and historians
unearth new material and new interpretations with each new decade, resulting in a much richer understanding of the life of Eleanor Roosevelt on screen.

**Filmography**


The Dana Carvey Show, episode 107. Dir. John Fortenberry. Perf. Dana Carvey, Steve Carell, Bill Chott. ABC, April 30, 1996. DVD.


Longines Chronoscope Interviews. Perf. Edward P. Morgan, Bill Down, Eleanor Roosevelt. CBS, August 26, 1953. DVD.


What's My Line? Perf. John Daly, Arlene Francis, Bennett Cerf, Dorothy Kilgallen, Eleanor Roosevelt. CBS, October 18, 1953. DVD.


Woman of the Year. Dir. George Stevens. Perf. Spencer Tracy, Katharine Hepburn, Fay Bainter. MGM, 1942. DVD.


Bibliography


Figure 24 Alice Hirson in "Crossings" (1986)

Figure 25 Heather Morgan on "The Dana Carvey Show" (1996)

Figure 26 Toni Gillman in "Driving Miss Daisy" television pilot (1992)
Figure 27 "FDR: A One Man Show" (1987)

Figure 28 Only in silhouette in "Great Day" (1945)

Figure 29 Eleanor Yeoman in "Hiroshima" (1995)
Figure 30 Marian Seldes in "Truman" (1995)

Figure 31 Sheena Larkin in "Varian's War" (2001)

Figure 32 Agnes Moorehead in "The World of Eleanor Roosevelt" (1964)