



Eleanor Roosevelt: A Study in Shifting Cultural Prisms

Article Record

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RECEIVED

2026-03-14

ACCEPTED

2026-03-27

ONLINE PUBLISHED

2026-06-25

PUBLISHED

2026-08-05

PEER REVIEW

Double Blind

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Eleanor Roosevelt

Popular Culture

Gender Roles

First Lady

Biography

Women's History

Lorena Hickok

AI USE STATEMENT

No generative AI was used for analysis or results.

FUNDING

No external funding was declared for this work.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY

Not applicable for this article.

ETHICS

No ethics committee approval was required for this article type.

CONSENT

Not applicable for this article.

TRIAL REG.

Not applicable.

Crossref DOI: 10.34257/GJHSSC254801

How to Cite: Beasley (2026). Eleanor Roosevelt: A Study in Shifting Cultural Prisms. Global Journal of Human-Social Science, 26(2), 26-31. DOI: 10.34257/GJHSSC254801

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Print ISSN 0975-587X



9 770975 587004

Online ISSN 2249-460X



9 772249 460013

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ARCHIVAL RECORD

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Abstract

Every culture needs heroes and heroines to ensure social cohesion, but portrayals do not remain static. They change as social values tilt from one direction to another. The image of Eleanor Roosevelt in popular culture offers a vibrant illustration. Niece of one United States president, Theodore Roosevelt, and the wife of another, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Eleanor, the longest-serving First Lady in U.S. history, ranks as arguably the most important U.S. woman of the twentieth century and one of the world's best-known figures. To the public, Eleanor represents multiple roles – wife, mother, political leader, activist, diplomat, journalist, and media celebrity. She died in 1962 but remains a persona that functions as a prism through which to view attitudes toward women's roles. Her portrayals, including her own self-depiction from her birth in 1884 until her fatal illness, illustrate acceptable perimeters for women at different periods. When hidden details of her life emerged, she became a focal point for arguments over women's conduct.

Keywords: Eleanor Roosevelt, Popular Culture, Gender Roles, First Lady, Biography, Women's History, Lorena Hickok, Social Change

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1. OVERVIEW

The most active presidential spouse to date, Eleanor acted as a lightning rod for disagreement over woman's proper place while in the White House from 1933 to 1945. Her constant travels on behalf of the Roosevelt administration, her interest in racial justice, and her determination to earn her own money made her far different from previous presidential spouses. While she encountered criticism for unwomanly activism as First Lady, she also received numerous awards, including four honorary doctor of law degrees, for advocating social betterment. In 1939 *TIME* magazine chose her as one of the few women pictured on its cover, describing her as "the world's foremost female political force."¹

After the unexpected death of Franklin in 1945, Eleanor served as a U. S. delegate to the United Nations, a leader of the Democratic Party, writer, speaker, international traveler, and television personality. At her death, she garnered praise as the "First Lady of the World."² This tribute incorporated her success in achieving passage of the U.N. Declaration on Human Rights, a document increasingly important since its adoption in 1948. As Harvard legal scholar, Mary Ann Glendon, put it, "Today, the Declaration is the single most important reference point for cross-national discussions of how to order our future together on our increasingly conflict-ridden and interdependent planet."³

In her autobiography, three volumes published at different periods after being serialized in mass-circulation magazines, Eleanor constructed herself as an independent woman who overcame

personal insecurities within the framework of her husband's position and legacy. A year before her death, she condensed the three books into one, titled simply *The Autobiography of Eleanor Roosevelt*, and added new material, which emphasized her love of democracy, faith in the United Nations, and dedication to creating "greater understanding between peoples."⁴

Reviewers and readers alike praised her three volumes. The first, *This Is My Story* (1937), ran initially in the *Ladies' Home Journal*. Eager buyers swept 250,000 copies of the magazine with her first installment off newsstands. Eleanor described how she moved past the rigid, upper-class bias of her orphaned upbringing and the domination of her mother-in-law, Sarah Delano Roosevelt, venturing into politics while her husband recuperated from infantile paralysis.

The second, *This I Remember* (1949), appeared in *McCall's*, a popular woman's magazine, picturing Eleanor as a pathbreaking First Lady who assisted the mobility-impaired Franklin as he combated the Depression of the 1930s and subsequently led efforts to win World War II. It chronicled her activities as she provided information for her husband and spurred him to advance New Deal social programs, although she conceded that "the spurring was not always wanted or welcome."⁵ An overwhelming commercial success, *This I Remember* became a Book-of-the-Month-Club selection.

On My Own, the third autobiography (1958), published first in the *Saturday Evening Post*, chronicled her international travels and work for the United Nations, modestly recounting how she took part in world affairs after her husband's death. Her condensation of the three books into a single autobiography received mixed

¹"Oracle." 1939. *Time*, April 17:22.

²M. van Thoor, "Death of Eleanor Roosevelt," 2001. In Beasley, M. H., H. Shulman, and H. R. Beasley, eds., *The Eleanor Roosevelt Encyclopedia*. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 122.

³M. A. Glendon. 2001. *A World Made New: Eleanor Roosevelt and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. New York: Random House, xvi-xvii.

⁴P. M. Spacks, "Autobiography," 2001. In Beasley, et. al., *The Eleanor Roosevelt Encyclopedia*, 40-41.

⁵A. E. Roosevelt, 1949. *This I Remember*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 349.

reviews. One reviewer pointed out, “The human individual, the true ER, is not revealed.”⁶

2. UNEXPECTED REVELATIONS

After Eleanor died, her self-portrait of growing independence within the perimeters of her marriage, a narrative embraced by her first biographers, was upended by the disclosure that Eleanor and Franklin had considered divorce in 1918 while Franklin was serving as Assistant Secretary of the Navy in Washington. In his memoirs Jonathan Daniels, whose father Josephus Daniels had been Secretary of the Navy, recounted Franklin’s love affair with Lucy Mercer, Eleanor’s social secretary.⁷ Knowledge of the romance, which had been hushed up for years, led to assumptions that the Roosevelt marriage existed in name only after 1918 even though Eleanor agreed to remain Franklin’s wife if he promised never to see Lucy again.

Eleanor emerged as a wronged wife who stayed married due to Franklin’s political career, financial considerations, their children, and social mores that considered divorce a disgrace. Syndicated columnist Drew Pearson speculated that emotional scars inflicted by the affair, rather than desire to be a helpmeet, stimulated Eleanor to pursue her own career in the White House.⁸

Franklin’s biographies mentioned the rift between husband and wife.⁹ They included comments from Franklin’s aides who pictured Eleanor as disliking compromise, criticizing her husband behind-the-scenes, and failing to acknowledge his declining health.¹⁰

More revelations occurred when the papers of Lorena Hickok, a journalist who had covered Eleanor for the Associated Press and worked as an undercover reporter on Depression conditions for the Roosevelt administration, were opened at the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library in 1978. Correspondence between Eleanor and Hickok, called Hick, revealed their intense relationship when Eleanor entered the White House. In a biography of Hickok, Doris Faber, a journalist, expressed dismay that the library had released the letters, which she feared would diminish Eleanor’s reputation. The correspondence documented Eleanor’s unhappiness after Hick left Washington following Franklin’s inauguration in 1933. Eleanor wrote Hick, “I felt a little as though a part of me was leaving tonight, you have grown so much to be a part of my life that it is empty without you even though I’m busy every minute.”¹¹ Excerpts from the correspondence also appeared in an article, “First Lady a Lesbian?” in the publication, *Lesbian Tide*.¹² Speculation arose that Eleanor and Hick had been drawn to each other because they both had plain appearances.

In response, members of the Roosevelt family and some historians hotly denied that Eleanor had a homosexual affair with Hick, contending that Eleanor expressed herself emotionally to many correspondents in keeping with Victorian styles of letter-writing. Entering the controversy, Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., a leading biographer of Franklin, argued in the *Washington Post* section that even if Eleanor had been a lesbian, that should not diminish

public respect for her achievements.¹³ The *Post* also featured views of Rhoda Lerman, who had based a novel on Eleanor’s discovery of Franklin’s love for Lucy.¹⁴ Lerman speculated that Eleanor might have had a physical relationship with a woman but that she was more attracted to men.¹⁵

Subsequently, Blanche Wiesen Cook, Eleanor’s biographer, fought against presumptions that Eleanor, the mother of six children (one of whom died in infancy), lacked the capacity to express herself sexually. These presumptions stemmed from Eleanor’s children. Her daughter, Anna Roosevelt Halsted, recalled her mother had instructed her that sex was simply a wifely obligation. One of Eleanor’s sons, James Roosevelt, declared that his parents did not have sexual relations after Eleanor learned of Franklin’s affair.

The Hickok letters caused new interpretations of Eleanor’s life. Reviewing Eleanor’s close attachments, Anne Constantinople, a Vassar professor, found they illustrated broadly-defined sexuality based on human relatedness. Constantinople pointed to historian Susan Ware’s examination of Eleanor’s deep, successive involvement with four persons: Earl Miller, a highway patrolman who acted as her bodyguard when Franklin was elected governor of New York in 1928; Hickok; Joseph P. Lash, who wrote the Pulitzer-Prize winning biography, *Franklin and Eleanor*; and David Gurevitch, her doctor.¹⁶

Recent writers looked at Eleanor’s personal life from the standpoint of queer theory. In an academic journal, *AMERICANA*, Angela Beauchamp called attention to twenty-first century television programs and films that presented Eleanor as defying socially acceptable categories of womanhood by living “outside heteronormative models.”¹⁷ She stressed that gender-oriented filmmakers view Eleanor as engaging in a life very separate from the normative, a life “quite queer, regardless of any sexual activity that we will likely never know about.”¹⁸

3. CHANGING IDEAS

In accord with Eleanor’s autobiography, popular culture first treated Eleanor as a supportive wife acting as the “eyes and ears” of a somewhat disabled president. The full extent of Franklin’s inability to walk was kept secret from the public until it formed the basis for a Broadway play in 1958, “Sunrise at Campobello.”¹⁹ Made into a movie two years later, the production reenforced the image of Eleanor as a devoted wife who overcame objections from Franklin’s mother, Sara, to back Franklin’s political aspirations after he was stricken with infantile paralysis.

After Franklin’s affair became known, biographies by Lash presented Eleanor as surmounting personal disappointment in marriage by embracing worthy causes.

The advent of feminist studies complicated Lash’s picture of an unfulfilled wife who sublimated her own desires through work for social betterment. In two volumes in the 1990s, Cook portrayed

⁶R.H.S. Crossman, 1962. “Mrs. President,” *New Statesman* 64: 3 Aug., 149. See also W. A. Rusher, 1962. “We Surrender Dear,” *National Review* 11 4 Nov., 308-309.

⁷J. Daniels, 1968. *Washington Quadrille: The Dance beside the Documents*. New York: Doubleday, 145.

⁸J. A. Edens, 1994. *Eleanor Roosevelt: A Comprehensive Bibliography*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 178.

⁹K. S. Davis, 1993. *FDR: Into the Storm, 1937-1940*. New York: Random House, 5-6.

¹⁰G. C. Ward, 2001. “Franklin Delano Roosevelt.” In Beasley, et. al., *The Eleanor Roosevelt Encyclopedia*, 456.

¹¹D. Faber, 1980. *The Life of Lorena Hickok: ER’s Friend*. New York: Morrow, 119.

¹²Edens, *A Comprehensive Bibliography*, 180.

¹³A. M. Schlesinger Jr., 1979. “Eleanor Roosevelt and the Styles of Friendship,” *Washington Post* 23 Oct., Sect. C: 1-2

¹⁴See R. Lerman, 1979. *Eleanor: A Novel*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

¹⁵H. Mitchell and M. Rosenfeld, 1979. “Eleanor Roosevelt and the Styles of Friendship,” *Washington Post* 23 Oct., Sect. C: 1-4.

¹⁶A. Constantinople, 2001. “Sexuality,” In Beasley et. al., *The Eleanor Roosevelt Encyclopedia*, 476-477.

¹⁷A. Beauchamp, 2020. “I Will Not Be Your Little China Doll: Representations of Eleanor Roosevelt in Film and Television,” *AMERICANA: The Journal of American Popular Culture (1900 to Present)*, Spring, volume 19: 5 https://americanpopularculture.com/journal/articles/spring_2020/beauchamp.htm accessed Jan.1, 2022.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁹“Sunrise at Campobello,” in *Wikipediaorg/wiki/Sunrise_at_Campobello*, retrieved 25 Oct. 2022.

Eleanor as a courageous woman who overcame upper-class bigotry to draw inspiration from other women, operate as a shrewd politician herself in the Democratic party, and take high-minded stands on issues – like peace and racial justice – during the 1930s. Cook, who contended Eleanor and Hick had a fervent love affair, viewed their relationship as “taken out of context and treated meanly” instead of being seen as part of “a hard-won struggle to live life fully.”²⁰

The Hickok letters brought a new dimension to Eleanor’s place in popular culture at a time when homosexuality and bisexuality, once only whispered about, gained currency in general conversation. Referencing newspaper headlines, such as “Secret Romance of President Roosevelt’s Wife – the Untold Story,” Rodger Streitmatter edited the most erotic Roosevelt-Hickok letters in 1998. He argued that Eleanor, whose associates included numerous lesbian couples, “was a professed believer in sexual freedom.”²¹

In a 2010 book, Hazel Rowley examined the Roosevelt marriage and determined that the couple’s extraordinary political partnership allowed each party to seek personal fulfillment with others. Rowley pointed out that Franklin had close ties with his secretary, Missy LeHand, and a tender relationship with his cousin, Daisy Suckley. She noted that Hick, often short of money, lived at the White House when she was in Washington and slept in Eleanor’s sitting room, but that her picture was cut out of official photographs.²²

4. DIVERSE IMAGES

Each of these four cultural images of Eleanor – loyal wife, proponent of worthy causes, courageous leader, and symbol of sexual freedom – has been featured in varying forms of media for decades. In fiction, biographies, cartoons, plays, television programs, films and videos, Eleanor’s life continues to be explored in the twenty-first century in accord with changing ideas of women’s competencies and acceptable behavior.

Numerous examples exist in popular culture. For instance, in twenty mysteries written by her son Elliott from 1984 to 2001, an all-knowing Eleanor solves crimes in the White House and other locales connected with the Roosevelts. She figures in two recent novels featuring women detectives, as she backs women pilots in Britain during World War II in one book and surmounts being falsely accused of seducing a woman secretary in a second one.²³ Romance novelists fictionize her intimacy with Hick.²⁴

Nonfiction writers ponder the degree to which passion between Eleanor and Hick influenced Eleanor’s extraordinary career. One writer, Susan Quinn, commented, “The letters between Eleanor and Hick are less remarkable now for their shock value than for the moving and poignant story they tell of two women who loved each other intensely and deeply.”²⁵

Study of cultural images pertaining to Eleanor provides insight into what has been viewed as acceptable conduct for women in general during the last century. Her life illustrates how women

have been transformed from subordinate to multi-dimensional individuals in popular culture.

5. LOYAL WIFE

During Franklin’s first term as President, Eleanor used her White House platform to reach out to other women. Not content with the stereotypical role of being the President’s hostess, she staged press briefings for women reporters only, held conferences on women’s issues, and traveled ceaselessly around the country. She also earned income herself by writing and speaking. Churning out magazine articles and advice columns, she syndicated a daily newspaper column, “My Day,” a diary of her activities, gave commercial radio broadcasts, lectured on noncontroversial topics like the importance of education and published books.

An inviting target for cartoonists, Eleanor stood 5 feet, 11 inches tall, weighted 160 pounds and displayed prominent front teeth. Cartoons in newspapers upholding racial segregation and opposed to Franklin’s administration depicted her with hostility. Other cartoons presented her as the kindly presidential spouse. John Knott in the *Dallas Morning News* drew her driving a car to offer a lift to “The Forgotten Woman” in the Depression.²⁶ The most famous cartoon appeared in the *New Yorker*. It showed two astonished men working in a coal mine looking up from their labors with one exclaiming, “For gosh sakes, here comes Mrs. Roosevelt.”²⁷

Possibly it inspired her own visit to a coal mine two years later.

The *Washington Evening Star* mocked her women-only press conferences in a Clifford Berryman cartoon that pictured women reporters chattering inanely and asking silly questions.²⁸ Discounted by men reporters, Eleanor’s press conferences upended the Victorian idea that it was unladylike for wives of presidents to seek publicity. They created a bond between her and women reporters, some of whom had been hired by male-only news organizations because Eleanor refused to allow men to attend the weekly briefings.

In her autobiography Eleanor acknowledged the press conference idea originated with Hick, who told her that women reporters were in danger of losing their jobs unless they “could find something new to write about.”²⁹ The women accepted Eleanor’s money-making ventures, especially since she donated most of what she earned to charitable causes, modernizing the concept of a lady bountiful. The reporters applauded Eleanor’s travel to serve as Franklin’s “eyes and ears.” According to Hope Ridings Miller, society editor of the *Washington Post*, “We all felt that she was absolutely marvelous to look after him so well.”³⁰ Eleanor claimed that she used the conferences to inform the public about White House life and that she had no intention of trespassing into Franklin’s domain, although she sometimes did, pushing the boundaries of a public role for women.

“My Day,” her chatty syndicated column parodied for rambling details, attracted both pro-and anti-Roosevelt cartoonists. Its unpretentious tone allowed Eleanor to tell what she did both within and without her family circle. After Franklin’s death, she said her favorite cartoon referred to efforts by journalists to learn whether her husband would run for an unprecedented third term in 1940. Appearing in the *Chicago Times*, the cartoon portrayed

²⁰B. W. Cook, 1992. *Eleanor Roosevelt*. New York: Viking, vol. 1, xii.

²¹R. Streitmatter, 1998. *Empty Without You: The Intimate Letters of Eleanor Roosevelt and Lorena Hickok*. New York: Free Press, xix.

²²H. Rowley, 2010. *Franklin & Eleanor: An Extraordinary Marriage*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 194.

²³See J. Winspear, 2022. *A Sunlit Weapon*. New York: HarperCollins. Also, S. E. Macneal, 2015. *Mrs. Roosevelt’s Confidante*. New York: Bantam.

²⁴See S. W. Albert, 2016. *Loving Eleanor: The Intimate Friendship of Eleanor Roosevelt and Lorena Hickok*. Bertram, TX: Persevero Press.

²⁵S. Quinn, 2016. *Eleanor and Hick: The Love Affairs That Shaped a First Lady*. New York: Penguin, 6-7.

²⁶*Dallas Morning News*, 1933, 22 Nov.

²⁷*New Yorker*, 1933, 3 June.

²⁸*Washington Evening Star*, 1934, 19 March.

²⁹Roosevelt, *This I Remember*, 102.

³⁰M. H. Beasley, 1987. *Eleanor Roosevelt and the Media: A Public Quest for Self-Fulfillment*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 104.

her typing “My Day” in bed near a picture of Franklin while musing, “But it would make such a nice scoop if you’d only tell me, Franklin.”³¹ It indicated a gulf between the Roosevelts, not commented on at the time. The public assumed that Franklin as a man had no obligation to consult his wife.

6. IMPACT OF WORLD WAR II

Before the United States entered World War II, Eleanor signed a contract with the Pan American Coffee Bureau, which paid her \$28,000 for a series of twenty-eight Sunday evening broadcasts over the National Broadcasting Company (NBC). When the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, due to her contractual obligations, Eleanor addressed the nation before Franklin did. Calling on Americans to rally for the war that lay ahead, she declared, “We are the free and unconquerable people of the United States of America.”³² When a later broadcast warned housewives of an impending sugar shortage and led to hoarding before rationing was instituted, journalists questioned her judgment. She was excused on grounds of what columnist Raymond Clapper referred to as “naivete” that led her heart to outrun her head.³³

On her February 22, 1942 broadcast, Eleanor defended herself after she was forced out of the position of Assistant Director of Civil Defense, an unpaid post to which Franklin had appointed her, making her the first president’s wife to hold a government office. After six months she left the job amid criticism for hiring her friends at high salaries, including a ballroom dancer to direct children’s recreation in bomb shelters. The press soon softened its condemnation on grounds Eleanor had meant well. The *New York Times* said her resignation did not reflect upon “her goodwill and her unselfish devotion to the general welfare.”³⁴

Eleanor also used her program to defend the administration’s decision to intern Japanese Americans in camps. While she had disagreed with this move in “My Day” two months earlier, after Franklin ordered internment she told listeners, “Friendly aliens have to suffer temporarily in order to insure the safety of the vital interests of this country while at war.”³⁵

She supported Franklin in public, even if she profoundly objected to his decisions.

Eleanor’s global travels during the war, publicized as undertaken at her husband’s request to improve the morale of troops, led to scathing caricatures in the Republican press. A Joseph Parrish cartoon in the *Washington Times-Herald* pictured Eleanor happily waving from a plane, while below her a motorist was chastised for using rationed gasoline and denounced as “Hitler’s little helper.”³⁶ Less accepted by the public than her earlier travels, Eleanor’s wartime trips provided material for her newspaper column and magazine articles, with supporters regarding them as continuation of her “eyes and ears” mission. Visiting soldiers and expressing concern for them, Eleanor solidified her image as a motherly figure as well as an intrepid journalist.

In August 1942 the premier cartoonist Herblock drew her and her secretary in a lifeboat with commandos, having survived an

attack on a ship sinking in the background. Printed in newspapers across the country under the caption, “Just Don’t Be Surprised, That’s All,” it satirized the bland tone of “My Day,” with Eleanor shown dictating, “My Day has been rather a busy one.”³⁷

Franklin permitted Eleanor’s extensive visit to the South Pacific, which he initially opposed, to keep her out of the United States after her advocacy for civil rights unleashed critics who charged she had caused race riots. When violence burst out in Detroit in 1943 following Eleanor’s push for integrated housing for defense workers, many people in both the North and South pointed accusing fingers at the First Lady, according to historian Doris Kearns Goodwin.³⁸ The editor of the *Jackson (Mississippi) Daily News* thundered, “It is blood on your hands, Mrs. Roosevelt.”³⁹

Fearful of offending Southern Democrats in Congress, Franklin said little on race.

Similarly, he stayed aloof from Eleanor’s efforts to aid refugees seeking to flee Hitler’s persecution of the Jews. Although the public expressed limited interest in refugees, Eleanor’s position was seen as appropriate for a benevolent First Lady. Not so her stand on civil rights. Large segments of the North joined Southern segregationists who did not see her as a good woman when it came to race.

By the time Eleanor left the White House in 1945, it was impossible to overlook all that she had accomplished. She had written more than 2,500 columns, 200 articles and six books, including two autobiographies and an examination of the basis of democracy, and given at least 70 speeches annually along with scores of radio broadcasts, while influencing New Deal programs.⁴⁰ She had transformed the position of First Lady from hostess to leader, but, nevertheless, she had remained within her husband’s orbit.

After Franklin’s death on April 12, 1945, Eleanor rejected suggestions that she seek political office – possibly the presidency – and told a reporter, “The story is over.”⁴¹ This was not to be.

Joseph Lash, whom she first met as a disillusioned youth activist in the 1930s, played a major part in revising it.

7. SAINTLY HEROINE VS. COURAGEOUS LEADER

In 1971 Lash published, *Eleanor and Franklin*, a biography praised as the definitive story of the couple’s personal life. With first-hand knowledge of the Roosevelts, Lash offered new insights on their marriage. The son of Russian Jewish immigrants, he had toyed with communism after receiving a master’s degree from Columbia University in 1932. Becoming close to Eleanor following the end of her intense relationship with Hick, he was selected by Franklin D. Roosevelt Jr. to write Eleanor’s biography and given sole access to her files.

Eleanor met Lash, national secretary of the American Student Union, in 1939 when he was called to Washington to testify before the House Committee on Un-American Activities investigating communists in youth organizations. An opponent of the committee, which equated liberalism with communism, Eleanor attended

³¹ *Chicago Times*, 12 May 1940. See A. R. Paddon, “Cartoons,” in Beasley, et. al., 76-79.

³² “Pearl Harbor Attack,” 1941. Script of Eleanor Roosevelt’s radio broadcast, 7 December. In S.D. Smith, ed., 2014. *The First Lady of Radio: Eleanor Roosevelt’s Historic Broadcasts*. New York: New Press, 191-192.

³³ R. Clapper, “Mrs. Roosevelt Sees No Evil,” *Liberty* magazine, 4 April 1942, included in scrapbook “Amidst Crowded Days,” Eleanor Roosevelt Papers, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, NY.

³⁴ “Mrs. Roosevelt Resigns,” editorial, *New York Times*, 21 February 1942.

³⁵ Script of Pan-American Coffee Bureau Broadcast, 15 February 1942. Ruby A. Black Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

³⁶ *Washington Times-Herald*, 15 September 1943.

³⁷ Beasley, *Eleanor Roosevelt and the Media*, 152 and following illustration.

³⁸ D. K. Goodwin, 1994. *No Ordinary Time: Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt: The Home Front in World War II*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 445-46.

³⁹ See A. M. Black, 1996. *Casting Her Own Shadow: Eleanor Roosevelt and the Shaping of American Liberalism*. New York: Columbia University Press, 91-92.

⁴⁰ Black, *Casting Her Own Shadow*, 47-48.

⁴¹ Michaelis, *Eleanor*, 440.

the hearing at which Lash appeared, resulting in committee members toning down their questioning. She urged Lash to keep in contact with her.

Lash soon resigned from the communist-Influenced student union and embraced the New Deal. After leading the youth division of Franklin's 1940 presidential campaign, he became head of the International Student Service, and ran an integrated youth leadership institute at the Roosevelt summer home at Campobello, New Brunswick.

Eleanor's closeness to the much-younger man dismayed conservatives who considered Lash a dangerous radical. It led to false reports in Eleanor's confidential file kept by J. Edgar Hoover, head of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, that the First Lady and Lash indulged in a salacious relationship.

Drafted into the Army in 1942, Lash was stationed on Guadalcanal which Eleanor insisted on visiting during her South Pacific trip so she could spend time with him. Following the war, he worked as a reporter in New York, covering Eleanor when she was at the United Nations.

Eleanor and Franklin, a phenomenal best-seller, enthralled the reader with dramatic details: Eleanor's friction with her mother-in-law; her difficulties as a mother; but above all, her despair when she stumbled on the love letters between Franklin and Lucy. Describing Eleanor's misery after she learned of Franklin's affair, Lash wrote of Eleanor's "desolating conviction that she had failed as a woman and was in some way responsible for Franklin's involvement with Lucy."⁴²

Out of her suffering, Lash contended, she realized that she could find fulfillment only through her own actions. "She buried herself in work," Lash explained.⁴³ Painstakingly covering her career, he made almost no mention of Hick. His biography ended with Lash pointing out Eleanor's anguish when she learned that that Lucy, then a wealthy widow, had been with Franklin when he died unexpectedly and had dined with him at the White House during her frequent absences. Lash asked rhetorically if this had not been "another dark night of the soul for her."⁴⁴

In a second volume, *Eleanor: The Years Alone*, Lash reported on Eleanor's importance at the United Nations, her frustrations with her children, and her around-the-world trips as an unofficial U.S. ambassador. He noted her closeness to Dr. David Gurewitsch, her physician, who replaced Lash as Eleanor's chief confidant in the late 1940s and accompanied Eleanor on her overseas travels. In her last years, Eleanor shared a house in Manhattan with Gurewitsch and his wife, Edna, who published a book in 2002, *Kindred Souls*, that analyzed Eleanor's deep affection for the doctor almost two decades her junior. Edna stated that Eleanor loved him but understood a physical relationship was out of the question.

After the Hickok letters attracted attention, Lash published two books, *Love, Eleanor: Eleanor Roosevelt and Her Friends* and *A World of Love: Eleanor Roosevelt and Her Friends: 1943-1960*. Although intended to show that Eleanor used gushy terms of endearment in letters to many people besides Hick, none of the letters Lash used conveyed the intimacy of the Hickok correspondence. The long-range significance of Lash's work centered on the way his initial biography was utilized for television. *Eleanor and Franklin* was made into an Emmy-winning docudrama in 1976 and followed with a sequel, *Eleanor and Franklin: The White House Years*, in 1977.

Lash's image of a betrayed wife who turned to good works resonated with the public for decades. It influenced audiences who disliked Eleanor's portrayal as a shrewish spouse in *Hyde Park on Hudson*, a 2012 British film that presented Franklin in simultaneous dalliances with both his secretary, Missy, and cousin, Daisy Suckley, while Eleanor tied herself to Hick. Viewers expressed displeasure with the selfish Eleanor in online comments and compared the movie unfavorably with the 1976 docudrama.⁴⁵

The framework for examining Eleanor's life shifted in 1992 with the publication of the first of Blanche Cook's three-volume biography. A professor of history and women's studies, Cook spent ten years studying Eleanor's life. Retrofitting Eleanor into a feminist network, Cook argued that Eleanor's previous biographers had accepted the way Eleanor pictured herself in autobiographies that concealed her emotions. Calling denials of Eleanor's love for Hick "high-strung and voluble," Cook insisted that Eleanor's "romantic love for her younger friend Earl Miller, a highway patrolman, which began when she was forty-five and he thirty-two, had been dismissed almost without hesitation."⁴⁶

Lamenting that Eleanor's correspondence with Earl Miller had been lost, Cook speculated that Franklin did not offer Miller a job in Washington to separate him from Eleanor, a move that intensified her relationship with Hick. Praised for resurrecting Eleanor as a feminist heroine, Cook's first book introduced Eleanor operating within a world of supportive women and Miller.

In volume two, which covered the years 1933 to 1938, Cook quoted extensively from the Hickok letters, showing how Eleanor's position as First Lady interfered with efforts to maintain a private relationship with Hick. Cook presented Eleanor as Franklin's partner at the White House, waging political battles behind the scenes, standing up for African Americans and youth, and using the media to influence public opinion. "Fueled by power, they were each dedicated to making life better for most people," Cook wrote.⁴⁷

Sixteen years after volume two, Cook published her concluding book, which chronicled Eleanor's life from 1939 to 1962. It stressed the widening gap between Eleanor and Franklin and Eleanor's difficult position when her beliefs on vital issues such as refugees clashed with Franklin's official policies. Cook's well-received work clashed sharply with Lash's portrayal of a betrayed wife.

8. TODAY'S SYMBOLISM

In Eleanor's most recent biography, the nature of the relationship between Eleanor and Hick is left unclear. In his 2020 one-volume biography, David Michaelis wrote of "intimacy – left incomplete," as Eleanor withdrew from Hick after eighteen months.⁴⁸ This occurred as Eleanor found it increasingly hard to make time for Hick, who had given up her journalistic career and been reduced to political jobs engineered by Eleanor.

Beauchamp pointed out that Eleanor has been pictured or "referenced in more than four hundred film and television programs...not including her own newsreel and television media."⁴⁹

Referring to queer theory, she contended that Lash's portrayal of Eleanor as a betrayed wife countered "whispers about Eleanor's sexuality at the time" [and] "actively disrupts a normative

⁴²J.P. Lash, 1971, *Eleanor and Franklin*. New York: Norton/New American Library: 325.

⁴³Ibid., 325.

⁴⁴Ibid., 929.

⁴⁵Beauchamp, "I Will Not Be Your Little China Doll," 6.

⁴⁶Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt*, vol. 1, 13.

⁴⁷B. W. Cook, 1999. *Eleanor Roosevelt*. New York: Viking, vol.2, 1.

⁴⁸Michaelis, *Eleanor*, 344.

⁴⁹Beauchamp, 1.

understanding of this woman's independent life."⁵⁰ Equating independence with same sex orientation, however, seems questionable, if it means that ideas about heterosexual marriage allow women no latitude for self-development.

Arguing that narratives since 2000 have led to public acceptance of Eleanor as queer, Beauchamp included movies, such as *Hyde Park on the Hudson* (2012) and independent films by women like *The Honeymoon Years of Eleanor Roosevelt and Lorena Hickok* (2005).⁵¹ Nevertheless, Eleanor is not always presented as a clear-cut symbol of sexual freedom. The 2020-21 television series, "Atlantic Crossing," treats her as a talkative First Lady who observed Franklin romantically involved with Norwegian Princess Martha and counseled Martha's husband on how to save his marriage by referring to mistakes made in hers.⁵²

Eleanor's career, with its emphasis on women expanding the traditional feminine sphere, personified the ideals of social feminists of her day. She did not frame her voluminous writings columns in gender-specific terms. Yet, her main audience was other women, who looked to her for advice.⁵³

Esther Van Wagoner Tufty, a long-time Washington correspondent, recalled during Eleanor's centennial celebration in 1984, "Eleanor Roosevelt caused more to be written by, for and about women than any other woman."⁵⁴

Today Eleanor occupies a secure place in popular culture. The last major poll on First Ladies, conducted in 2014, found that Eleanor retained the title of America's Best First Lady in polling.⁵⁵

She remains a role model for many. In 2011, Noelle Hancock, an unemployed blogger, published a memoir, *My Year With Eleanor*. She wrote that she conquered her fears – and climbed Mt. Kilimanjaro – inspired by Eleanor's advice, "You must do the thing you think you cannot do."⁵⁶ Eleanor's life continues to inspire in different directions.

⁵⁰Ibid.

⁵¹Beauchamp, 9.

⁵²<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/masterpiece/shows/atlantic> Retrieved Oct. 26, 2022.

⁵³M.J. Binker, ed., 2018. *If You Ask Me: Essential Advice From Eleanor Roosevelt*. New York: Atria Books, x-xii.

⁵⁴Remarks by Esther Van Wagoner Tufty, American News Women's Club, Washington, DC., 27 September 1984.

⁵⁵See the Siena Research Institute website, <http://www.siena.edu/sri/research>.

⁵⁶See N. Hancock, 2011. *My Year With Eleanor Roosevelt*. New York: HarperCollins.