Opportunity Denied: Limiting Black Women to Devalued Work. By Enobong Hannah Branch. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2011, 190 pp., $69.00 (cloth); $23.95 (paper).

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The hypothesis at the center of Branch’s *Opportunity Denied* is that to understand black women’s current struggle with poverty, one must know their disadvantaged past. To take the reader on this journey through the past, the author draws on U.S. census data and archival sources to trace black women’s labor force experiences in three occupations from 1860 to 1960. The story does not end in 1960 though; Branch discusses post–civil rights era changes with an account of black women’s labor market plight in the 1970s to the present day. The book offers more than a description of where black women worked. Instead, it paints a detailed picture of the working conditions, societal treatment, and occupational trajectories of black women across a century. In doing so, Branch makes a case that the labor market is where gender and race differences are transformed into broader, durable social inequalities. The book also exposes the origins of modern-day stereotypes of black women and compiles evidence to debunk these myths and stereotypes.

The book’s primary contribution is to detail black women’s employment from the decade before emancipation until 1960, right before federal civil rights laws began improving workers’ rights. The author organizes the book and history of black women’s employment around a discussion of the three occupations where black women were mainly allowed to work during this period: farm labor, domestic service, and low-wage factory work. In her discussion of these occupations, the reader gains a real sense of employers’ attitudes toward black women (they anchor the bottom of the occupational hierarchy), society’s view of black women (they are “fit” for dirty work), and the blatant segregation of black and white women at work. Branch makes a very convincing argument that black women hold a truly unique position in the labor
market: black women share little of black men’s labor history and have even less in common with white women.

The book’s emphasis on intersectionality is both a strength and a weakness. It is a strength in that the book successfully demonstrates that treating black women like all women or like all blacks is inaccurate, at best. For example, without an intersectional lens, we forget that the exploitation of black women helped white women, and that black women had a harder time breaking out of low-paying occupations than black men. The emphasis on intersectionality is a weakness only in the sense that the author spends a lot of space “selling” readers on the approach. Of course, this “weakness” may be a plus for a reader unfamiliar with intersectionality, including introductory-level graduate students and undergraduates.

Overall, the book’s organization around occupations drives home the author’s thesis. First, because the organization emphasizes the major, long-standing occupational segregation of black women (there are only three occupations to discuss), and second, because it helps the reader see more clearly the real lack of change in black women’s labor market opportunities over a century. The book’s concluding chapter covering post–civil rights gains, which we learn are mostly temporary and smaller than they appear given black women’s very low starting point, drives home the point that black women are nowhere near being on equal footing with their white female peers and black (or white) men. A prime example of this: we learn that in 2008, over half of all employed black women were clerical or nonhousehold service workers (p. 146) and the income of about 16 percent of these clerical workers fell below the poverty line (p. 147). We also learn that if they are lucky enough to gain managerial positions, black women almost always manage other black women.

Although the focus of the book is not directly on family, the book is of central importance for readers who study work–family overlap. Readers learn, for example, that black and white women experience these domains differently: historically, black women were punished for not being employed (even when finding and keeping work was difficult). White women were told not to work. Black women were told their own families could not get in the way of their labor. White women employed black women to take care of white families.

There is much to learn from this book. It is a must-read for any scholar serious about the past, present, and future of black women in the United States. Readers interested in law will appreciate Branch’s discussion of the ways laws restricted black women’s access to occupations outside of domestic service and perpetuated occupational segregation along race and
sex lines. Finally, readers will also find in chapters four and five rich detail on the social mechanisms driving occupational segregation along race and gender lines.

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