

Preface

My first book considered the social and cultural history of women in early twentieth-century Atlanta. It explored how images of white and African American working-class women served larger debates about the direction of the city's growth. Narratives about cleaning up the city and restoring order relied heavily on curtailing and surveilling women's presence in public. Women, however, often ignored or challenged efforts to control them—calling for police to protect them from harassment, taking to the streets to demand suffrage or better working conditions, and filling the city's dance halls and other sites of leisure despite dire warnings of the danger these spaces held.

I was impressed by the confidence these early twentieth-century women demonstrated when it came to accessing public space. When I later came across news footage of a group of women protesting street harassment on the crowded sidewalks of Wall Street in the early 1970s, catcalling at the men they passed and telling reporters they did not want to be treated like “sexual objects,” the broad shape of this book started to come together. I saw women on both ends of the twentieth century rejecting messages that told them the streets were not for them and challenging old ideas that a woman who was in public could not be good or moral. This is how I began to see a thread connecting activists, reformers, and different groups of women across the century.

Beyond this new understanding of women's activism, I was also drawn to the topic because it spoke to my own experience, particularly the experience of being a feminist scholar who was supposedly savvy about power relationships yet still often felt out of place when walking alone. Being approached on the street—“Smile!” “You out here all alone?”—left me unnerved. Although my scholarly credentials haven't helped me much when I'm out in public, they have equipped me with the skills to head into the archives and discover both

history and context for what many individuals experience daily. The goal of this book, then, is to explain the history that created patterns of harassment, narratives of danger, and the deep sense of unease many women experience in public. More than just answering the question of why women seem so vulnerable to fear and harassment when out in the world, I really wanted to know what has been done to confront and interrupt these patterns. As it turns out, a lot has been done. By understanding where society has been on these issues, I mean to arm the readers of this book with a keener understanding of what is at stake when people encounter an urban landscape in which their presence is questioned or restricted because of their gender presentation, however normative or transgressive that presentation is.

I want anyone who has ever felt out of place in public—be they someone who identifies as a woman or someone from another disadvantaged group—to feel validated in their discomfort, frustration, or even fear instead of diminished or dismissed. I want them to see that these experiences are not trivial or anomalous, but part of a larger system, an institutionalized hierarchy that generally privileges men, especially straight white men. It does so through a pattern of gender segregation that extends from the workplace to domestic roles, to how, why, and when people move through public space. Gender segregation is intertwined with other systems of social control and rooted in institutions and practices that were built over time—which means that, if understood, they could be rebuilt differently.

If you have lived as a girl or woman in American society, you are likely to read something in this book that will revive old memories and provoke feelings of frustration, fear, or anger. I wrote this book for you. Your reactions are valid and have meaning.