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Breaking the Mold: Four Asian American women define beauty, detail identity, and deconstruct stereotypes

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Abstract

The experiences of four women reveal how notions of outer beauty touch ideas of personal ethnic identity, racism, media-imposed pressure, and social stereotypes; shaping the lives of Chinese, Chinese American, and Asian American women.

Keywords

Asian American, identity, ideal beauty, ethnicity, stereotype, notions, COLA, English

Subject Categories

Asian American Studies | Asian Studies | Journalism Studies | Other Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies

Breaking the Mold:
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deconstruct stereotypes

By Allison Ginwala

At the end of a gravel road in the San Bernardino Mountains near Running Springs, California, stands St. Anne's Catholic Church. Next to the small church is a sign that reads, "Daffodil Garden." Beyond the simple marker flowers pour across five acres of land. Yellow, orange, white, and pink daffodils planted in groups that swirl like a river. Pathways wind between the blooms, through the ridges and slopes, leading the way to scenic spots and wooden benches.

Gene Bauer, the woman responsible for the display of natural beauty, lives with her husband Dale in a house near the garden. A sign on the porch answers questions each visitor may have about the expanse of color. The answers are simple: 50,000 bulbs, planted one at a time by one woman, begun in 1958. For many years, they opened their privately maintained and financed garden in the spring for hundreds of visitors to explore.

Knowledge of Bauer's patient act of gardening spread through the community, gaining notoriety through word of mouth. Now known as the Daffodil Principle, Bauer's story has made its way into inspirational speeches, nature blogs, and a book about joyous living by Jaroldeen Edwards.

A tale of one woman's vision of creating beauty carried out by simple tasks, day after day, the Daffodil Principle is a maxim of celebration; Proof that moving toward a goal one step at a time can yield resplendent results.

One Saturday afternoon this past February, six women gathered together in Somerville, Massachusetts, to embrace the spirit of the Daffodil Principle. These women, members of Asian Women for Health, arranged pieces of felt, one at a time, as a symbol of beauty, unity, and support for the Asian female community.

In the United States, ideal beauty is often established visually: magazines, television, and movies all propel what society deems women should aspire to. For American women, ideal beauty is embodied as tall, thin, and pale with a symmetrical face and big eyes surrounded by long lashes. In a culture driven by white, Anglo-European beauty norms, how do women of Asian ethnicity view this notion of ideal beauty and their own beauty in American society?

The experiences of four women reveal how notions of outer beauty touch ideas of personal ethnic identity, racism, media-imposed pressure, and social stereotypes; shaping the lives of Chinese, Chinese American, and Asian American women.

“When I think of ideal beauty, I think it’s not one type of beauty, it’s in the eye of the beholder,” said Shirley Matthew,¹ director of the Lincoln Filene Center for Community Partnership in Tisch College of Citizenship and Public Service at Tufts University. “You can be any race, any size or shape, and still possess inner and outer beauty.”

Matthew connects the university to local non-profits and public agencies and is a member of the organization Asian Women for Health, led by the ever-passionate executive director Chien-chi Huang.

Huang moved to the U.S. from Taipei, Taiwan, to pursue a graduate degree in communication in the 1980s. After earning her degree, she worked in international advertising before she left the field and started a non-profit that offers support specifically to Asian women.

Her concept of ideal beauty is split between east and west. She pictures the classic beauty in Chinese culture and also the western Caucasian beauty. For her, the eyes, almond-shaped and slanted or large and deep-socketed, are the defining trait.

“Ideal beauty is always couched in this western notion of what’s considered most beautiful, but I think Asians have beauty as well,” said Monica Chiu, English professor at the University of New Hampshire.

She specializes in Asian American studies and literature and tries to incorporate discussion of socially-created norms and stereotypes into her classroom, because community can only be fostered through allies in an open space.

Novina Surusa joined the United Asian Coalition at the University of New Hampshire to find a community of others who she can relate to. A Chinese Indonesian sophomore studying electrical engineering, Surusa’s family moved to the U.S. when she was 10 years old. Her closest friends, fellow United Asian Coalition members who also moved from Indonesia, share her culture.

For her, ideal beauty is inextricably linked with confidence; beauty from within.

Describing ethnicity is not a cut and dried task for Matthew.

“I’m Chinese, so I often say I’m Chinese or Chinese American. Sometimes I say Asian American because I identify with broader Asian culture,” Matthew said. “I use my discretion based on who’s asking; a learning opportunity.”

“When I say Asian American, it’s more rooted in the U.S.,” she explained.

Her father was born in the U.S. during the Great Depression, making her a third-generation American. She is clearly proud of her family’s history and bristles at the implication sometimes associated with an Asian ethnicity.

“I think it’s more of a political statement,” she continued. “Everyone thinks of Asians as being newcomers.”

The debate over labels that Matthew encountered is not a new one. Sonia Shah, investigative journalist and author, shares her qualms with certain labels in her article “Asian American?” published in *Race, Class, and Gender in the United States: An Integrated Study*.

Shah writes, “The term “Asian American” itself is problematic. Most of the people whom others would characterize as “Asian American” most emphatically don’t think of themselves that way. Our particular histories, ethnicities, and nationalities are one million times more visceral and meaningful in our lives than pan-Asianness.”

Taking a less ardent stance than Shah, Matthew understands how personal identity and nationality can incite passionate responses.

“I can see it all ways,” Matthew said. “I think ‘Asian American,’ the whole concept was in reaction to racism and how Asians were treated in the U.S.”

She paused for a moment to search for the correct term in order to relay the concept she wanted to pinpoint.

“It’s socially constructed,” she concluded.

A social construct is a perception created by a group that’s upheld through social practice and interaction. Constructs are shared and shaped by social forces like relatives, peers, popular culture, and history. An individual’s definition of personal ethnicity helps create an identity similar to how ideal beauty set by society shapes a woman’s self-perception.

Adhering to a society’s constructed beauty ideal can be simultaneously empowering and disempowering for a woman. On one hand it presents a choice and independence over her own body to control it and make it what she likes. Yet on the other hand it is a minimally free choice as her thoughts and actions are forced by an externally created standard.

Childhood years were heavily effected by issues of personal identity for Chiu. The daughter of a German mother and a Taiwanese father, Chiu's family was a unique staple in a community that wasn't accustomed to diversity.

"It was very new for most of our neighbors," Chiu said. "They don't do interracial marriage."

Are those your children? People would ask the blue-eyed mother, when she took her dark-haired, dark-eyed toddlers out into town. Chiu's mother strived to incorporate both parents' cultures into their home, often cooking fried American Chinese foods.

"My friends would come to my house and say, 'oh your house smells weird,'" Chiu said.

She referenced the graphic novel *One! Hundred! Demons!* by Lynda Barry. In one chapter, Barry described her self-consciousness about her home and how it smelled of the Filipino food her family cooked.

"I had exactly that experience, and then I was embarrassed for a while," Chiu said. "My house smells weird. I internalized it."

She started meticulously cleaning her house before her friends visited, trying to erase the smell.

"That's why books like Barry's really resonate with me," she said. "Because I understand; I lived it."

A native Wisconsinite, Chiu sometimes fields the follow-up question "where are you *really* from?" when her initial response of "I'm from Wisconsin" isn't accepted.

"I know what they want," Chiu said.

Questions such as this aren't about her hometown, but her ethnicity. A nondescript inquiry that becomes tedious.

“You start to feel that you are an alien in your own country,” Chiu said. “I was born here. I’m an American, I’m a Wisconsinite, I’m a cheese head.”

Such microaggressions can’t simply be overlooked. In *Arab in America*, a course text that Chiu teaches in her Asian American graphic narratives class, the main character’s friends tell him to laugh off ignorant questions about his ethnicity, which are usually tied to his physical appearance. As a bearded, Middle Eastern man, he can’t take it lightly. He faces it every day; always pulled aside in security lines, always the suspect.

“I think it starts to grate on you after a while,” Chiu said. “I have a lot of understanding for people who think they look different.”

Growing up in La Crosse, Wisconsin, Chiu encountered racial slurs from her peers.

“You know the kind you pull back your eyes, ‘chinky chinky,’” she said.

She mimicked her words and pulled the outside of her eyelids out and toward her hairline to demonstrate.

Huang also faced racism, but not until she moved to Massachusetts from Taipei in her early twenties.

“Where I came from, it’s a very homogenized society and I would not be treated differently because of how I look,” Huang said. “But here, that was the first time I experienced discrimination, a hate crime, because of the way I look or how I dress.”

One day, walking between Porter Square and Davis Square, a bustling section of Somerville, Massachusetts, a minivan full of white teenagers drove past Huang. One of them threw a rock at her head. She was shocked, and couldn’t understand what inspired them to attack her. At the time she wore her hair in a long braid, a style that resembled a *queue*, popularly

associated with the Qing Dynasty, which she thought could have played a part in their shouting racial slurs, “go back to China,” as they drove away.

Media often serves as the disseminator of ideals, expectations, and values to a culture. For physical attractiveness, media images set and contextualize current standards by giving life to messages that connect outer appearance with happiness and success.

In their study "Skin Lightening and Beauty in Four Asian Cultures," five professors from universities in the U.S., Canada, and Japan analyzed skincare product advertisements in order to learn about contemporary cultural beauty associations. Among the data analysis results, they found that Caucasian models were featured most often for global beauty brands. In addition, 45 percent of Korean advertisements and 55 percent of Japanese advertisements featured Caucasian models.

Another study, "The Construction of Beauty: A Cross-Cultural Analysis of Women's Magazine Advertising," by professors from Taiwan, the U.S., and Singapore showed that Caucasian female models were the most seen in advertisements from the three most popular fashion and beauty magazines in each country. For the U.S., the most frequently featured models were Caucasian, seen in about 91 percent of advertisements. Only 1 percent of advertisements in the U.S. featured Chinese models.

Such American beauty and advertising trends frustrate Matthew. Knowing at a young age that her face did not match the standard, she tried instead to meet expectations set on her as a Chinese American woman.

“I definitely tried to fit the mold that people wanted me to fit,” Matthew said. “The ‘China doll’ kind of thing.”

Like many young women, Matthew experimented with phases of styling, noticing that dressing in a certain manner earned her more compliments. It wasn't until her early twenties that she realized the "misguided occurrence" of dressing to please others and filling a stereotype impacted her self-esteem. The social pressure took its toll.

"Once I became aware of what was happening, I wanted it to stop," she said.

The objectification theory posed in the *Encyclopedia of Women and Gender* holds that "women internalize an observer's perspective of their physical appearance, and relate to themselves as "objects" in need of habitual self-monitoring and manipulation." This manner of self-perception increases a women's chance of developing shame, anxiety, and depression.

Female objectification comes into play in American media's singularly-focused portrayal of Asian and Asian American people. Rarely is an Asian or Asian American actor cast in a role not defined by their race.

"When you talk about media and Asian Americans you often think about either Lucy Liu, the dragon lady, or someone like Sandra Oh, who's beautiful, sexy, attractive, and there's nothing in between," Chiu said. "What happens when Miss Saigon comes to Hollywood and the person who plays the Asian protagonist is a man in yellow face; can't you find an Asian actor?" she said.

Matthew noted that while American media today is attempting to diversify by incorporating non-traditional beauty ideals in popular mediums, the challenge still exists in achieving this goal in an authentic and sincere way, not simply objectifying the "exotic Asian."

"Americans will use minorities to push the exotic look," Huang said.

During her time working for the international accounts branch of an advertising agency, one of her clients was Revlon Cosmetics. She noticed the trend of the “exotic Asian,” as well as companies using the “American look” of white women to push western prestige internationally.

Wendy Chapkis writes about the power media and advertising have to create a shared culture across country borders in her book *Beauty Secrets*. Her idea is that since the U.S. plays the largest part in international popular media, it sets the standards. The biggest shareholder of the “global culture machine,” as long as the U.S. holds a monopoly, beauty will continue to be defined by western culture.

Not fitting neatly into one ideal can be as straining as trying to become another. Matthew navigated the pressure to adhere to western beauty while also being questioned for her lack of features many associate with Chinese ethnicity.

“I don’t look like a very standard Chinese person,” she said. “A lot of people when they first meet me, they ask, are you biracial?”

She isn’t sure what it is about her appearance that raises such questions, but attributed it perhaps to her lack of “traditional almond-shaped eyes.”

“I don’t really know what it is because I am all Chinese and I think of myself as Chinese,” she said

A female Tufts University student who Matthew was already acquainted with was surprised to learn that she is Chinese, even after multiple interactions together. The student remarked, “Wow I had no idea you were Chinese” to which Matthew responded, “What did you think I was?” The student didn’t know; she’d never thought about it.

What may seem like an innocent misconception, Matthew thinks such comments are being made by people who feel as if they are paying her a compliment.

“Oh, you don’t look so Chinese,’ that’s a little insulting,” Matthew said. “Why would you say I don’t look Chinese? Is there only one way to look Chinese?”

Asian blepharoplasty, known as double eyelid surgery, is the third most popular plastic surgery worldwide, according to the International Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgery. It’s the most common aesthetic plastic surgery in Taiwan, Hong Kong, South Korea, and Thailand.

During middle school in Taipei, Huang had female classmates that had double eyelid surgery.

“They were so ashamed they wouldn’t admit they did that; they had to justify it,” she said.

Huang recalled her peers claiming inverted eyelashes as the reasoning behind their cosmetic surgery. Often afflicting those of Asian descent, epiblepharon is a condition where the eyelashes invert and irritate the eye’s surface. Double eyelid surgery was perceived as less shameful if it was to fix a problem, not to conform to a beauty standard.

“The recovery time was quite painful and the women looked bad while healing,” Huang said. “They’re willing to suffer.”

Cultural anthropologist Eugenia Kaw published research in the early 1990s about Asian American women and cosmetic surgery in the journal *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*. Kaw focused on double eyelid surgery and nose bridge reconstruction as two cosmetic surgeries sought out by Asian American women to alter facial features that are “considered characteristic of their race [associated] with negative traits.”

Kaw writes that “these associations that Asian American women make between their features and personality characteristics stem directly from stereotypes created by dominant culture in the United States and by western culture in general.” Kaw’s argument pins the

responsibility of a skewed self-beauty image on popular media. Asian and Asian American women had surgery to gain confidence, but the initial lack of confidence was implanted in their minds by society.

“They had surgeons telling them ‘these [eyes] are the windows to the world and yours are closed,’” Chiu said, referencing Kaw’s article. “If you get enough signals telling you that you’re not pretty enough or you’re not good enough than you’re going to take it to heart and believe it. Once the idea is planted in your head, it can play out that you perform at a lower level,” Chiu said.

Statistics from the International Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgery and Huang’s schoolmates show that surgeries embracing western features are not popular solely in the U.S., but in regions where theoretically the pressure is minimal, simply because of the power of suggestion.

“Just because you’re in a different country doesn’t mean you’re safe from cultural imperialism and concepts of beauty,” Matthew said.

“It’s because what they see on TV is saying that in order to be beautiful you need to have aquiline noses and wide eyes and thin lips,” Chiu said.

The *Cultural Encyclopedia of the Body* is a collection of essays that examine body parts through cultural contexts. Authors touch on how bodies are understood and treated in different societies as well as how they are represented by popular culture and the media. One excerpt referenced women of Asian descent in American media.

“Women of Asian heritage are radically underrepresented in American advertisements, especially advertisements for beauty products, on television programs, and in other public forums where physical beauty is an important qualification.” It goes on to reference Kaw’s

critique of double eyelid surgery as an “inscription of Anglo European beauty ideals upon the faces of Asian American women.”

In September of last year, TV personality Julie Chen revealed on CBS’s *The Talk* that she had cosmetic eye surgery when she was 25 because she was told she looked “too Chinese” to be on American television.

Chen, now 43, was a local news reporter in Dayton, Ohio, when she requested to fill in for the regular anchors during their vacations. CBS News reported that Chen’s news director responded, “Let’s face it Julie, how relatable are you to our community?” He continued, “On top of that because of your Asian eyes, I’ve noticed that when you’re on camera, you look disinterested and bored.”

The terms “disinterested” and “bored” used to describe Chen’s eyes echo the language Kaw picks apart in her article. Kaw spoke with Asian American women who had a desire to change their “sleepy,” “dull,” “passive” eyes for “big,” “sharp,” “alert” eyes.

From that moment on, Chen said “all I could see was my eyes.” Other agents also told her they couldn’t represent her unless she got cosmetic surgery. Chen wrestled with the opposing forces of being proud of her Chinese heritage and driven by passion for her chosen career. After speaking with her parents and weighing her options, she had the procedure to alter her eyelids.

The language surrounding double eyelid surgery contributes largely to the issue of normalizing Anglo-European features. Advertising the procedure as “removing excess skin” implies a flaw; *excess* that doesn’t belong. It’s as if by some design mishap, Chinese women are born with extra skin that must be corrected surgically.

In a recent weekly meeting the United Asian Coalition, a student-led organization at the University of New Hampshire, focused on Asian lifestyle, health, and beauty. Topics such as

hairstyles fads, makeup trends, and exercise routines were presented by the group's board members and discussed by the membership.

Beauty and historical uses of makeup in Asian cultures was the first topic, accompanied by a visual aid that made the statement "everyone uses a skincare product in some manner," whether it be for acne, moisturizer, or wrinkles.

One member posed the question of social acceptability of cosmetic surgery in Asia. The consensus from the board members leading the topic discussion was that it varies; in South Korea it's very acceptable, but in China less so.

As the meeting concluded, the presenters asked the membership questions about their personal experiences with health and beauty. One asked how many people had ever seriously considered getting plastic surgery. In a room of twenty people, three women raised their hands in affirmation.

Novina Surusa lived in Bekasi, Indonesia, a suburb of the capital Jakarta, until her family moved to New Hampshire in 2005.

Secretary for the United Asian Coalition, Surusa was one of the presenters for the Asian lifestyle, health, and beauty discussion. She wasn't surprised that three of her fellow female members had seriously considered cosmetic surgery. She pointed out that East Asian cultures place a lot of importance on physical beauty and therefore invest a lot of money in products and procedures. She has friends following the trend of tattooing their eyebrows and eyeliner.

"I mean it looks good, but I don't know," Surusa said.

She searched for the right words to relay her feelings about the process, trying to share her opinion without putting her friend in a negative light.

"I understand because I use my eyeliner every day. But it's still a taboo for me," she said.

“You always have to look your best” is a cultural beauty norm Surusa places on Asian countries. She gleaned her opinion through friends from other Asian cultures and “youtube-ers” with similar interests. For example, she follows Bubsbeauty (Hong Kongese), Michelle Pham (Vietnamese), and beautifymeeh (Korean) for beauty tips.

“Grooming is like enhancing your features, that’s what I like to do,” she continued. “It will make me more confident when I present myself.”

Surusa’s beauty crutch is eyeliner. “I don’t know if I can actually go out without using eyeliner,” she said, quickly amending her initial stance with the fact that she definitely could, but would really prefer not to.

When she lived in Indonesia, Surusa used soap that advertised the ability to make her skin whiter.

“I was in a tropical country so I was darker than this,” she gestured to her arm, showing her skin tone. “Believe me, so much darker; but ever since I moved here, not so much. I get darker in the summer, but I don’t mind it.”

Roughly 15 percent of people worldwide use skin lightening products, according to a 2007 consumer report by Nielson, a company that studies over one hundred countries to learn about global trends. The report, “Health, Beauty and Personal Grooming,” shows that in China 30 percent of people use skin lightening products on a daily basis. Other Asian countries had similar numbers, for example 20 percent of Taiwanese women and men and 10 percent of Japanese women and men also lighten frequently.

According to a Business World article by Johanna Poblete, the popularity of skin lightening has not decreased since Nielson’s 2007 report, with more products becoming available for Asian consumers. In 2012, the skin lightening market in the Asia-Pacific region had an

estimated value of \$13 billion, according to David Tan of Asian Scientist.com. In China specifically, Tan reported that the skincare market was worth \$5.5 billion, with whitening products alone occupying 71 percent of the skincare market.

Recently, a change in terminology was evident in many whitening product campaigns. Instead of promising “whiter” and “lighter” skin, products provided a path to “natural,” “radiant” and “flawless” skin. For example, Procter & Gamble shifted its marketing technique for Olay White Radiance from advertising a “kabuki-white” complexion to providing a “perfect-looking type of fairness” achieved based on the person's own skin type.

Advertising Olay White Radiance and similar products like Pond’s Flawless White as ways to achieve flawless, fair, natural-looking skin implies that women of color must alter their skin to become beautiful. However, Tan wrote that some women in Asia “wish to maintain their fairness or be even fairer and understand why women with darker skin may want to lighten their skin.”

Surusa defended such products, in favor of the results they gave her from regular use.

“They try to make it as natural as possible,” she said. “It corrects your skin tone.”

To some, the language used in advertising is part of the problem, but Surusa swears by such products like her favorite BB or blemish balm correcting cream. “It’s really convenient,” she said.

Asian Women for Health is a community-based network that supports the health and wellbeing of Asian women through education and advocacy. For Huang, founding Asian Women for Health was the last step in a long process of facing issues of identity in the midst of illness.

Huang was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2004 and quickly noticed that she was always the only Asian woman present at the support groups she frequented throughout her illness. It surprised her to learn later on that many Asian women she knew had breast cancer, but refrained from talking about it.

Starting the Asian Breast Cancer project and later Asian Women for Health wasn't a goal that Huang set for herself.

"It just fell on my lap," she said.

In June 2012, she submitted her community support group, the Asian Breast Cancer project, to become a non-profit organization. The result was the formation of the broader Asian Women for Health, which received 501 (c)(3) status in 2013.

Asian Women for Health hosts regular meetings and functions for members to gather and interact. Beauty and body image are often discussed, an important topic during times of health and sickness for Asian women.

"We understand that losing your hair or losing your breasts will have a big impact on how you feel," Huang said.

The organization puts on events like benefit fashion shows to help empower Asian women to think beyond one aspect of their physical beauty.

"We want to tell them that they have other body parts they can be proud of, not just breasts; they have their legs, their face, their eyes," Huang said.

Also hosted by Asian Women for Health is an annual mental health forum to address and support issues that impact Asian women.

"We do talk about the body image issue because a lot of young Asian women have this problem," Huang said.

She knows young women who struggle with their personal and cultural identity, being of Asian descent born in the U.S. or relocating to the U.S. at a young age.

“They’re trying to assimilate to the dominant, mainstream culture and society,” she said.

At the mental health forum in 2013 one Asian American woman shared a slideshow that told of her difficulty battling depression, racism, sexism, body image, and attempted suicide.

Having an outlet and community to share with helped alleviate the feelings of alienation.

Fifty guests gathered on a Thursday night in the Wolff Auditorium at Tufts Medical Center in Boston. The room was full of women speaking Mandarin, English, Arabic, and Vietnamese.

Huang, her hair pulled back in a ponytail, wearing an Asian Women for Health t-shirt, posed for a few photos then scurried around the auditorium encouraging people to enjoy the food spread in the lobby. The hors d’oeuvres were a mixture of fruit, cheese, and crackers followed by eggrolls and *chuar*, grilled Chinese kabobs.

She went from group to group, asking women how they heard about the event, inquiring about their background and community connections. One group of seven women came to the event together. They’re Chinese American; their mothers used to play mahjong together, they told Huang.

They continued to chat about an upcoming lecture on Chinese civil rights at a local community center and a recent wedding some of them attended. The sense of community in the room was palpable; the type that only comes to fruition through shared experience, supporting Asian women to live happy, healthy lives.

“Tonight is a night we appreciate you all. We’ve accomplished so much in such a small amount of time,” Huang said from the podium, introducing the third annual AppreciASIANS event.

The night was full of speeches, offering support and praise for the women who’ve helped create Asian Women for Health and advocates who have broadened the organization’s reach. Speakers emphasized the power of community and benefit of voicing personal issues instead of keeping them locked up inside.

Huang honored three of Asian Women for Health’s board members, Jia Zhen Lu, Bik Fung Ng, and Dr. Han Ting Lin, for their hard work and dedication. They each received a clear plaque shaped like a heart. Through the example of these women, Huang shared with the audience the Daffodil Principle and how members of her organization took it to heart.

As the audience filed out of the auditorium thoroughly lifted in spirit, they were pointed to a table that held the orange and yellow felt daffodils, crafted on a cold February afternoon.

“Please take one,” encouraged the woman sitting behind the table; a token of sympathy, support, and community.

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ⁱ Following her request for privacy, Shirley's last name has been changed for all copies of this thesis not used for direct academic review.