American Women in the 1950s

Tues. & Thurs. 11 a.m. to 12:15 p.m.
King 341

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Course Description: This course will explore women’s experiences of and contributions to social, cultural, and political life in the U.S. during the 1950s. For many of us, the image that comes to mind when we think of women in the 1950s is a suburban housewife and mother like Donna Reed or June Cleaver. But how much did real women’s lives have in common with their sitcom counterparts? Using a wide variety of sources (oral histories, memoirs, novels, magazine articles, advertisements, movies and TV programs, as well as works of history), we will study American women’s actual experiences of marriage, family life, the workplace, and politics, as well as the messages they received about what constituted “appropriate” behavior in both public and private life. We’ll pay special attention to women’s participation in the major social changes and cultural trends of the time, including the growth of suburbia and the rise of consumer culture, the Cold War, the Civil Rights Movement, the Beat Generation, youth culture, and rock and roll. We’ll also look at the diversity of women’s experiences, analyzing how differences of race, ethnicity, class, region, and age helped shape the opportunities and choices available to individual women.

Required Texts (available at the Oberlin Bookstore):
Nancy A. Walker, Women’s Magazines, 1940-1960: Gender Roles and the Popular Press
Brett Harvey, The Fifties: A Women’s Oral History
Joanne Meyerowitz, editor, Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960
Melba Patillo Beals, Warriors Don’t Cry: A Searing Memoir of the Battle to Integrate Little Rock’s Central High
Joyce Johnson, Minor Characters
Grace Metalious, Peyton Place
On days when we have assigned reading in one of the required books, bring your copy of the book to class.
Other Required Sources:
A number of additional readings have been placed on ERES. Please print out copies of
these readings and bring them to class on the days we’re scheduled to discuss them. If
you have trouble finding or reading an ERES text, let me know ASAP so I can correct the
problem. Hard copies of the ERES texts have been placed on regular reserve, so use those
if you have problems accessing or downloading the ERES versions. In addition to the
readings, we will be analyzing and discussing a variety of media, including films, TV
programs, advertisements, popular music, etc. Paper and exam questions will require you
to incorporate discussions of these audio-visual sources, as well as material covered by
the readings, lectures, and discussions.

Course Assignments and Grading:
  Attendance and Participation (1/3 of course grade): Student participation is
crucial to the success of this course. Students are expected to come to class on time,
having carefully read the assigned texts; to play an active role in class discussions and
small group in-class projects; to complete short in-class writing assignments; and to post
discussion questions on Blackboard before class on assigned days. Students will be
permitted two unexcused absences over the course of the semester. Additional absences
will result in the lowering of the student’s participation grade unless approved by the
instructor in advance or in the case of documented illness or family emergency.

  Papers (1/3 of course grade): Students will write three short papers (due on
Sept. 25, Oct. 9, and Dec. 4) in response to the assigned readings and audio-visual
materials. Grades for late papers will be marked down one grade step (e.g. A- to B+) per
day late, except in cases of documented illness or family emergency or by pre-
arrangement with the instructor.

  Final Take-Home Exam (1/3 of course grade): A cumulative take-home exam
will be handed out on the last day of class and will be due by 11 a.m. on Tuesday, Dec.
18 (the course’s scheduled final exam date).

Academic Integrity: All course work is governed by the Oberlin Honor Code. You will
be expected to attach a signed statement of the Honor Pledge to every written assignment.
We will discuss how the Honor Code applies to specific assignments in more detail over
the course of the semester.
Class Schedule

Part I: From Rosie the Riveter to June Cleaver

Sept. 4: Introduction to Class

Sept. 6: Rosie the Riveter to June Cleaver
   Reading: Women’s Magazines, pp. 37-62

Part II: Housewives, Suburbia, and the Rise of Consumer Culture

Sept. 11: Marriage and Family I
   Reading: Betty Friedan, “The Way We Were—1949” and The Feminine Mystique, Chapter 8 (both on ERES) and Women’s Magazines, pp. 97-125.

Sept. 13: Marriage and Family II
   Reading: Harvey, The Fifties, pp. 68-108 (“Mrs. Someone” and “The Motherhood Drift”)

Sept. 18: Suburban Living

Sept. 20: The Rise of Consumer Culture I
   Reading: Betty Friedan, The Feminine Mystique, Chapter 10 (ERES)

Sept. 25: The Rise of Consumer Culture II
   Reading: Friedan, The Feminine Mystique, Chapter 9 (ERES) and Joanne Meyerowitz, “Beyond the Feminine Mystique: A Reassessment of Postwar Mass Culture” in Not June Cleaver

Hand in Paper 1: Advertisement Analysis (2-3 pp.)
   Assignment: On the second floor of Mudd, you will find bound copies of Life, Look, and McCall’s magazines from the 1950s. Do some browsing and pick an advertisement in which a female character is prominently featured. Your paper should describe and analyze how the ad depicts women. What issues, experiences, concerns, or trends relating to gender roles and identity in the 1950s does the ad incorporate or comment on? As you study the ad, think about who is depicted and how they are positioned in relation to each other, to the setting in which they’ve been placed, and to the product that is being promoted. What do these spatial relationships convey? How are women, men, and children placed in relation to each other? What activities are they involved in and what does that suggest about underlying assumptions about their roles in the family or society? You should also discuss who the primary audience for the ad appears to be and what the ad’s message to that audience is. What product or service is being sold and how is it supposed to impact the consumer? What emotions or reactions is the ad trying to stir up? If there is
accompanying text (slogan, caption, ad copy), what message(s) is the language trying to convey and do they support or contradict the message of the image? You should attach a photocopy of each ad to your paper and identify where you found it (name and date of publication, page number).

Part III: The Politics of Motherhood During the Cold War

Sept. 27: Connecting Family, Community, and Politics in Different Cultural Contexts
Film: Salt of the Earth (in class)

Oct. 2: Gender Roles, the Labor Movement, and McCarthyism
Reading: Ellen R. Baker, On Strike and on Film, Chapter 6 and Conclusion (ERES)
Film: Salt of the Earth, contd. (in class)

Oct. 4: Mothers Against the Bomb
Film: Duck and Cover (in class)

Oct. 9 A Mother’s Campaign for Racial Justice
Reading: Ruth Feldstein, “‘I Wanted the Whole World to See’: Race, Gender, and Constructions of Motherhood in the Death of Emmett Till” in Not June Cleaver.

Hand in Paper 2: The Politics of Motherhood (5 pp.)
Assignment: The articles by Feldstein, Garrison, Gerson, and Rose in Not June Cleaver and the film Salt of the Earth depict mothers not only within the context of the home and family, but also as actors in the larger society. These articles (and the film) suggest that motherhood can be a public, political identity as well as a private, personal one. Based on the readings and film, write a paper that addresses how motherhood became politicized in the 1950s. Some questions you might consider: To what degree do these mother-activists accept or reject the ‘50s ideals of motherhood (as expressed by the women’s magazines, Friedan, and the women interviewed by Harvey)? Do they establish a different standard by which to judge what makes for a “good” or “bad” mother? Does the fact that they are mothers or the way they define a mother’s responsibilities help or hinder their causes in the eyes of the public, the media, their supporters, their opponents? What roles do the race and class of the mothers play in the way they present themselves and/or the way they are viewed by others? Are mothers more effective advocates for some causes than others? Is using motherhood in this way a conservative or a radical gesture? These questions are just to get you thinking— you should not attempt to answer them all. You should discuss at least three of the five sources mentioned above to support your argument.
Part IV: Women and Paid Labor

Oct. 11: Working Mothers, Black and White
Reading: Harvey, *The Fifties*, pp. 44-67 (“Post-doc or Paella?”)
Film: *Imitation of Life* (in class)

Oct. 16: Job or Career?
Film: *Imitation of Life* (in class, continued)

Oct. 18: It’s a Man’s World
Reading: *The Fifties*, pp. 148-174 (“Swimming Upstream”)
Film: *Imitation of Life* (in class, conclusion)

Oct. 23: NO CLASS: FALL RECESS

Oct. 25: NO CLASS: FALL RECESS

Part V: Gender, Race, and Civil Rights

Oct. 30: Coming of Age in a Segregated Society I
Reading: *Warriors Don’t Cry*, pp. 1-161

Nov. 1: Women and the Civil Rights Struggle I
Reading: *Warriors Don’t Cry*, pp. 162-210

Nov. 6: Women and the Civil Rights Struggle I
Reading: *Warriors Don’t Cry*, pp. 211-end

Nov. 8: Coming of Age in a Segregated Society II
Reading: Beth Roy, *Bitters in the Honey*, Chapters 6, 9, 11, 12, 13 (ERES)

Nov. 13: Racialized Sexual Violence
Reading: Danielle McGuire, “‘It Was Like All of Us Had Been Raped’: Sexual Violence, Community Mobilization, and the African American Freedom Struggle” (ERES)

Part VI: Bad Girls, Bohemians, and Cultural Rebels

Nov 15: Sex and the Single Girl
Reading: Harvey, *The Fifties*, pp. 1-43 (“Going All the Way” and Getting Caught”);
Nov. 20: Lesbian Life and the Homophile Movement
Film: Clips from *Before Stonewall* and *Word Is Out*

Nov. 22: THANKSGIVING: NO CLASS

Nov. 27: Becoming Bohemian
Reading: Wini Breines, “The ‘Other’ Fifties: Beats and Bad Girls” in *Not June Cleaver* and *Minor Characters* (first half).
Film: Excerpts from *All That Heaven Allows* (in class)

Nov. 29: The Beat Generation
Reading: Finish *Minor Characters*; excerpt from Kerouac, *On the Road* (ERES)

Dec. 4: Generational Conflicts
Reading: *Peyton Place*, Book I
Hand in Paper 3: Rebel Girls (5 pp.)
Assignment: Address one of the following topics:
1) Although in different ways, both Melba Patillo Beals and Joyce Johnson refused to accept the status quo, to conform to societal expectations. Compare/Contrast the ways in which the two women were rebels, outsiders, outcasts in terms of the racial and gender politics of the day. Consider their relationships to mainstream society and the communities/subcultures to which they belonged (family, friends, movements, racial/ethnic/religious identity). Did the African-American community, the civil rights movement, the Beat subculture provide different opportunities and/or create different restrictions than the mainstream? To what degree did they choose their outsider status, to what degree was it thrust upon them? If we accept that Melba and Joyce lived outside the mainstream of American society, what does that tell us about the mainstream—particularly in terms of what it expected of and valued in women?

OR
2) *Warriors Don’t Cry*, *Minor Characters*, and *Imitation of Life* all raise questions about identity and authenticity. Melba, Joyce, and the female characters in the film all play roles, put on masks, try to pass as something they’re not, or feel the need to hide who they really are, what they really feel, or what they really want in certain environments or certain relationships. Drawing on at least two of the sources, pick two or three “characters” and discuss why and under what circumstances they hide their “true” identities. In what ways does it help them, in what ways does it hurt them? Are their motivations similar or different? What does the fact that these women (real and fictional) often felt that they could not just be themselves tell us about American society in the ‘50s?
Dec 6: Policing Women’s Behavior  
**Reading:** *Peyton Place*, Book II

Dec 11: Sowing the Seeds of Feminism  
**Reading:** *Peyton Place*, Book III

Dec 13: The Girl Can’t Help It: Teen Culture and Fandom  
**Reading:** TBA

**Take Home Exam Due by 11 a.m. Tuesday, Dec. 18 in my office or mailbox**