

There's No Place Like *Home*: Arlene Francis and Domesticity in Doubt

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In February 1954, NBC spent \$1,000,000 on advanced promotion and advertising for the March 1 television premiere of *Home*; the appropriated amount was the largest in television history for a single program (“\$1,000,000 *Home*”). At NBC’s request, major weeklies ran two-page ads, such as one in *Variety* that read: “March 1, 1954. Remember this date. In the future it will be known as the day that *Home* had its premiere” (“House that”). Between 1954 and 1957, *Home* became the middle note of NBC President Sylvester “Pat” Weaver’s *T-H-T* creation, or the *Today, Home, Tonight* triad. While *Home* did not enjoy the longevity of *Today* or *Tonight*, it was the first major effort by a national network to capture the daytime audience of women. Live for an hour every Monday through Friday, NBC delivered the “queen” of homemaking shows with Arlene Francis as the first female “editor-in-chief.”

During an episode of *The Mike Wallace Interview* in 1959, Wallace declared, “television burns up writers, comics, and personalities the way a forest fire consumes trees. Frequently all that is left is the smoke and remembrance of things past. An outstanding exception is Arlene Francis. She is fireproof...one of the most successful women in television” (Wallace). For nearly thirty years, Francis appeared regularly on television alongside Mike Wallace, Edward R. Murrow, and Jack Paar, and thus helped establish the concept of television talk shows. Francis also achieved the rare position of being contracted to all three major networks. Among early television talk-show hosts, only Edward R. Murrow is represented by more programs at the Museum of Television and Radio (Timberg 40). In 1954, the

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July 19 issue of *Newsweek* called Francis “the first lady television,” declared hers “the most recognized face in America,” deemed Francis as important as Mamie Eisenhower and Eleanor Roosevelt, and asserted that “Arlene is to television viewers what Willie Mays is to baseball fans” (“Quick Queen” 23-4).

From 1949 to 1984, Arlene Francis maintained an unparalleled career that crossed network boundaries, connecting her to millions of Americans through the media of radio and television. Throughout her long career, Francis maintained a status that was almost exclusively reserved for men, yet most television histories fail to mention her impact. The reason for this is a culmination of two points. First, the history of television is primarily written through an institutional lens, concerned with which companies were running what or as the history of prime-time male stars. Here historians, whether coming from a textual, personal, or national approach shape television history for the United States solely from the network or executive perspective. Therefore, a great deal of the history of early television is documented in studies of technological history, and the history of men and the institutions they ran. Sweeping histories and encyclopedias such as *The History of Television 1942 to 2000* by Albert Abramson and *The Box: An Oral History of Television 1920-1961* by Jeff Kesseloff make significant contributions to the understanding these men and the early years of television but offer little gender analysis. Gary R. Edgerton’s monograph, *The Columbia History of American Television*, offers a selective history that focuses on network heads David Sarnoff, William Paley and Pat Weaver, offering a top-down history of the industry. *That’s the Way It Is: A History of Television News in America* by Charles Ponce de Leon also offers a similar analysis of television. Ponce de Leon traces the history of television news from the grim seriousness of Edward R. Murrow and Walter Cronkite to the snarkiness of John Stewart and Bill O’Reilly. By strictly focusing on evening news programming, Ponce de Leon subverts the significance of day-time news programming that was often headed by female personalities.

Such studies offer a wealth of invaluable information but are often written outside of critical and cultural discourses. This history is so isolating that in “Innovating Women’s Television” Marsha Cassidy and Mimi White argue that American audiences have forgotten a number of pioneering women (32). The television histories that do expand across the lines of gender, often tell women’s entertainment history inaccurately. For years, articles and interviews have examined *Tonight* and comedian Joan Rivers’ impact on the show. Yet, these histories fail to mention the dozens of women who tackled late night before her.

Women such as Virginia Graham, Betty White, and Arlene Francis sat in for Jack Paar years before Johnny Carson or Joan Rivers sat behind the desk. Francis was Jack Paar's favorite substitute, hosting a total of thirty-six times, and took over the position as host for a week during Paar's departure and Carson's instatement (Timberg 295). The lack of readily available information about women's work in the early days of television, allows for inaccuracies to creep into the historical record.

Second, Arlene Francis is an uncomfortable person to examine. Hardly a feminist heroine, she urged women to stop domineering men and declared that a woman's main role in life was to cater to and serve her husband. While at first glance Francis seems to have fulfilled the female stereotype of the 1950s, if viewed from another angle, she constitutes an important stepping-stone toward a more enlightened time. Her life echoes the constrained and often suffocating lives of white women in the 1950s, while also showcasing the sensitivities, depth, and tensions of the era. As feminist history emerged alongside the Women's Liberation Movement, figures like Francis were pushed aside because they failed to exemplify the values of a feminist hero. Early feminist historians worked to move women's stories from outside the confines of their homes, and through this process marginalized the histories of women who existed within and supported domestic spheres. While Arlene Francis and her contemporaries both benefited from and contributed to feminism, in a way, feminism is responsible for writing Francis and her achievements out of history.

In the 2013 documentary *Makers: Women Who Make America*, Gloria Steinem declared, "I don't remember any actual serious, smart women in television" in the 1950s (00:07:37-00:7:45). Steinem articulated the common assumption that 1950s television put women in a certain category, the perky mom in heels and pearls. That assumption is incorrect. During this period, Francis and her contemporaries set forward the idea that men and women were intellectually equal. Francis achieved unmatched power because her multifaceted identity reflected the disparities between pre- and post-war gender values. While she outwardly supported "domestic containment," she was highly educated and aware of her own capabilities as an intellectual.

Home: An Electronic Magazine for Women

Home was one of the most intelligent and lively mixes of daily journalism, information, and political discussions ever aired. *Home* provided Francis a platform, one in which a cultured, articulate woman shaped and exercised control over her own enterprise. NBC marketed *Home* as an electronic magazine for women with every show operating as a new, independent issue. The show drew a daily audience of three million viewers, had forty sponsors, received 500 phone calls a day, had a production budget of \$50,000 a week, received 5,000 letters a week, and employed seven female editors (Stole 137-9). *Home*'s technologically advanced set was created to attract women who were bored by other television shows. Pat Weaver, the show's creator, said, "*Home* was a show built for the women who were not watching soaps, game shows, daytime stuff" (Broughton 215). To woo female viewers, NBC built a \$250,000 rotating set. The innovative, circular set measured over sixty feet in diameter, and was "packed with electronic gadgets, stage turn-tables, platforms that moved up and down, and other well-publicized technological trickery" (Cassidy 150). The March 29 issue of *Time* described how the round set was divided into wedges that served as the program's multiple departments, while the camera and crew were stationed at the circle's center. One "wedge" housed *Home*'s musical performers, the Norman Paris Trio, while others were set up to resemble a kitchen, bedroom, garden area, and news station. The February 4, 1956 edition of *TV Guide* joked, that the title *Home* was a misnomer, "There never was another place like this" (9). The unique set also housed a \$30,000 remote controlled "monkey" camera, the first of its kind. Built on hydraulic extension booms, the camera suspended from the studio's ceiling and could "extend to 29 feet in any direction, revolve...360 degrees" ("\$200,000"). While the groundbreaking set drew millions of housewives to viewership, Arlene Francis maintained that *Home* should offer substantive content.

For Francis, *Home* allowed her to connect with millions of women around the country, as she hoped to share "the pleasure of living when you have knowledge" (Wallace). To accomplish this feat Francis used *Home* as a platform to connect housewives with America's best and brightest. In addition to interviewing entertainers like Ethel Waters and Jerry Lewis, Francis interviewed the first American woman to win the Nobel Prize for literature, Pearl S. Buck; author and activist Helen Keller; architect Frank Lloyd Wright; American lawyer and chief counsel for the United States Army during the McCarthy hearings, Joseph N. Welch; Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright, Thornton Wilder; Chief Justice William O. Douglas; United States Attorney General Herbert Brownell Jr.; Pulitzer Prize-

winning poet, Carl Sandburg; Vice President Richard M. Nixon; American evangelist, Billy Graham; U.S. Treasurer Ivy Baker Priest; pioneer of sex research, Dr. Alfred Kinsey; and Massachusetts Senator John F. Kennedy and his wife Jacqueline.

Other than Edward R. Murrow's *Person to Person*, which took audiences into the homes of entertainers, *Home* was the first show to "go on the road" (Timberg 41). Francis traveled so that viewers isolated in their homes could access people and cultures outside of their own. *Home* took its viewers everywhere from Gimbel's Department store in New York City to the A-bomb test in Yucca Flats; from Carl Sandberg's North Carolina estate to the New Year festivities in Japan. Together, Francis and her viewers attended Grace Kelly's wedding in Monaco, rode up the Eiffel Tower with Jean Seaberg, went underwater in Nassau, and on top of a catalytic cracker oil processor in Cleveland. An elaborate series entitled "Hometown U.S.A." brought *Home* audiences to Nevada, California, Boston, Washington D.C., and Philadelphia where Francis aired live from various historic buildings. Live on *Home*, she was the first woman to open the New York Stock Exchange, "I blew the whistle and all these men came charging out of their offices and started making money" ("Perils"). In D.C. Francis interviewed Senator Margaret Chase Smith of Maine in the first national telecast from the Department of Justice. Francis commented that Smith "has invaded a man's world, but, having invaded it, remains very much a woman" (Cassidy 143). This one statement echoes Francis' concerns about her own career and image. Her son, law professor Peter Gabel, argues "She wanted to portray herself in a man's world, but as a woman—a powerful woman in a man's world" (Gabel).

From 1954 to 1957 *Home* and Francis were voted the top women's program and top female personality by *TV Radio Mirror*. During this period, Francis became one of the highest paid television personalities. Prior to *Home*'s premiere, Francis signed a contract guaranteeing her a weekly salary of \$2,000 with \$3,500 in potential earnings depending on weekly sponsorship ("Inside"). *Variety* reported that she signed a percentage deal in which she could earn \$100,000 a year from *Home* ("\$1,000,000"). Francis was already the highest-earning game show panelist on television. She appeared on the panel of CBS's *What's My Line*, making more than both her male and female counterparts. It is estimated that she earned \$1,000 per episode; the standard was \$500, making her a "financial enterprise" ("TV Pay"). In 1957, *Time* reported Francis' earnings as upward of \$250,000 a year, and that she "makes trips to the bank in an armored car" ("Perils").

Yet, her power was limited; Francis had no financial control over *Home* or any other shows in which she appeared. In a world where women were essentially hired hands, they were required to do the bidding of the men in charge. Despite *Home's* focus on women, the real power holders were men and their failures contributed to the show's early demise. Male executives and staff members began taking advantage of *Home's* large budget and began employing unnecessary additions. Hugh Downs, *Home's* announcer and co-host, recalled that one low-ranking producer employed six secretaries (Downs 00:03:25-00:06:42). Male critics began printing unfavorable reviews about *Home's* female-centered agenda. Jack Gould wrote in *The New York Times* that the show's pace "begins to drag, at least for masculine ears" ("Home"). Anton Remenih commented in the *Chicago Tribune* that "from a man's point of view, *Home* is one of the most dangerous programs on television" ("TV's New"). Ultimately, internal tensions between Pat Weaver and NBC administrator Robert Sarnoff resulted in Weaver's firing. To the shock and dismay of Francis and her millions of viewers, *Home* was cancelled in late 1957. Francis believed the cancellation was caused by the show's "ambitious, educational programming" (Wallace). After a whirlwind four years, the final episode of *Home* aired on August 9, 1957.

Home is often noted for pioneering the "magazine" concept of advertising in which broadcasters and not advertisers are placed in charge of editorial content. However, critics argued that *Home's* editorial content became overwhelmed by commercialism and contributed to the show's demise. This is true, as many segments placed heavy emphasis on new commercial goods and how these purchasable items could ease the daily lives of housewives. Jack Gould feared that *Home* "might become a television department store" ("Home"). Yet, sponsors praised Francis for her abilities to "integrate programming content, personal charm, and selling" and coined her "Saleswoman of the Year" (Cassidy and White 41; Efron 24). Inger Stole argues that *Home* failed primarily because of the show's inability to provide consistent content that appealed to the diversity of American female audiences (115). Women began to feel that they were being preyed upon as consumers. One viewer commented "I have been very distressed that NBC...is thrusting *Home* on me" (Stole 114). In contrast, Marsha Cassidy argues that despite being called *Home*, the show and Francis offered "a striking validation of nondomestic behavior" (149).

Home's short-lived success and heavy emphasis on commercialism should not detract from the remarkable ways in which Francis and her editors worked within

their constraints to deliver quality information programming to female audiences. Francis used *Home* both to praise domesticity and to undermine it. The show and Francis showcase the struggle between power and passivity. This duality expressed the unresolved conflict between the ideals of an earlier time of activism, during which women struggled for political representation and the vote, and a revised set of norms for the 1950s that attempted to collapse women's political ambitions into the performance of domestic duties. Overall, her efforts offer insight into how white women managed their internal conflicts and negotiated power for themselves within male-dominated spheres. While accounts of television's history have long acknowledged the significance of the durable *Today* and *Tonight* shows, *Home's* early cancellation branded the program an inconsequential failure, and its historical importance has only recently been examined (Cassidy 133).

What's Her Name?

When selecting a personality as *Home's* leading host, NBC wanted "a pleasingly attractive middle-aged woman," as only an experienced woman could be trusted with serious content (Miller 106). Two hundred women, including Betty Furness, Myrna Loy, and Irene Dunne, were under consideration, until one executive mentioned Francis. She embodied exactly what the network wanted; she was "intelligent enough to handle an ad-lib show but simple and sweet" ("What is Her line?"). Francis' successes in radio and television resulted in her already being a household name, as audiences were drawn to her wise, witty banter, her "Wurlitzer" laugh, and "beautiful speech pattern" (Efron 23).

Arline Francis Kazanjian was born in 1907 in Boston, Massachusetts, the daughter of Leah and Aram. Her father, an Armenian immigrant, was a portrait photographer and her mother, a housewife. When Arline was seven, the family moved to Manhattan, where she began to express her wild desires for the stage. Concerned by his young daughter's "exhibitionist tendencies," Aram sent Arline to Mount St. Vincent Academy in the Bronx, New York, where she would learn to be a proper girl and good wife (Francis 9). During her stint at this Academy, Arline developed deep insecurities and a fear of rejection that would plague her for the rest of her life. Being the only Armenian and non-Catholic student, and insecure that her "nose [wa]s too long" and legs "too skinny," she set out to transform her personality and become "fun to be with" (Wallace). "I would lie awake nights trying to think of ways to make myself acceptable to the children so they would

like me,” she said. “I want to be appreciated,” she continued, “and I don’t care where or by whom” (Francis 15). In this environment, Arline learned the price of being different, became fearful of saying “no,” and put all her energy into being affable and agreeable.

Despite her father’s wishes to “find a nice rich feller and get married,” Arline Kazanjian became Arlene Francis, and set out for the theater and radio (Francis 21). In 1932, she made her film debut in *Murders in the Rue Morgue* playing opposite Bela Lugosi. Francis had a few early breaks doing voice-over work for radio advertisements. Her knack for eloquent, natural deliveries and easy characterizations landed her roles on several serials, many of them running concurrently. In 1938, she became the first female host of the radio show *What’s My Name?*, a show in which she would imitate famous personalities, a role that she would hold for eleven years. That same year she became a member of Orson Welles’ distinguished acting troupe, the Mercury Theater, performing in plays like *Danton’s Death* and *Horse Eats Hat*. In 1940, she began playing Betty opposite to Van Heflin’s Bob in the soap opera *Betty and Bob*. Three years later she became the first female game show host, as host of the radio show *Blind Date*, a live audience show in which service men vied for a date with a woman. Francis became known as radio’s “oomph girl” for her voice and her ability to express her warmth and charm across the airwaves (Gabel).

In 1946, Francis married fellow Mercury Theater actor Martin Gabel. In 1947, the Gabels welcomed their only child, a son named Peter. Gabel, famed for his radio voice-overs, worked as both an actor and producer in the theater, often producing plays that starred his wife. Gabel directed his wife on her business affairs, and Francis always sought her husband’s advice. When preparing for an interview with a powerful male leader, Francis urged Gabel to write the interview questions for her (Gabel). “Meeting so many generals, admirals, and powerful men is a little overpowering for a girl,” she said (“Home Away”). Throughout her life she insisted that it was Gabel who helped form her “public person.” *TV Guide* best described the Gabel-Francis marriage, “He treats her with a fatherliness that is not in the slightest way condescending, but with respect for her views...she treats him with a kind of flirting awe” (Gehman 28). In 1961, Francis and Gabel were selected as the “Husband, Wife Team of the Year” by the National Father’s Day Committee, for “the respect and affection in which they are held as a couple and as individuals by the public and by others in the entertainment profession” (“Arlene Francis, Martin Gabel”). It is unclear how much of their public relationship consisted of conscious

manipulation or was constructed to model “traditional” marriages, but Gabel consistently and publicly enumerated Francis’ successes and declared her “a national treasure” (Francis 66). When he accepted his Tony award for *Big Fish, Little Fish*, he said, “This is the first prize I’ve won since Arlene Francis consented to be my wife” (Francis 66). Francis and Gabel remained married until Gabel’s death in 1986.

By the fall of 1948 ABC, CBS, and NBC made the transition to television. Most people who had experience with live radio situations were men. These men transferred well as the unstable world of television mirrored the unpredictable atmosphere of radio work. Men like Fred Allen, Jack Benny, George Burns, Arthur Godfrey, and Milton Berle were considered captains who could anchor this complicated ship. Speaking with Mike Wallace, Francis noted her fears concerning the rise of television: “I know that when television started, I went to my manager and said well I’m finished. There’s no place for me in television, I’m a radio personality” (Wallace). However, in 1949 the producers of *Blind Date* decided the show would transfer well to television, and that Francis would remain “mistress of ceremonies.” Coming from both radio and theater, Francis entered the world of television with crucial experience in being a personality in front of a live audience and with, therefore, a high level of credibility with audiences at home. Despite Francis’ appeal and success, she existed within a society that confined women into their roles as wives and mothers. By existing outside of this prescribed role, Francis faced emotional struggles that are difficult to understand from a modern perspective. Her complex and enigmatic life proves that to ignore the complexity of 1950s women is to lose a more nuanced view of American feminism. If the society of that period reduced and did so little to reinforce women’s strengths, even these small combats must be strong statements.

The Career Woman-Housewife of 1955

Arlene Francis primarily promoted herself as a mother and wife, devoted to family and home, even though her professional trajectory was at odds with this public presentation. “Arlene is not exclusively a career woman,” noted *Look* magazine in 1956. “With her, husband and child come first” (“Arlene Francis”). Female personalities of the 1950s existed within a complex world; they were celebrated for achievements, but only as they connected to their ability to maintain their image as wife and mother. In “Pioneers, Girlfriends and Wives: An Agenda for Research on

Women and the Organizational Culture of Broadcasting,” Patricia Phalen chronicles the career experiences of women in television and radio broadcasting; “I think the role of women inside these systems...follows the same damned definitions: pioneer, girlfriends, wife, mother” (230). Phalen asserts that by applying the concept of “gender culture” to television broadcasting, that the experiences and needs of men determine the processes of television production. She notes that women in media organizations must adapt to structures that reflect the priorities of men; therefore, women’s value is determined by the success of their homes.

Nearly all of Francis’ publicity from the 50s and 60s glorified her “frantic” schedule and her ability to master both the domestic and non-domestic spheres. Yet sources continued to assert that “regular” women did not have career desires. The *Saturday Evening Post* continuously assured its readers that few housewives ever dreamed about any life other than that of a full-time homemaker, and that their occasional “blue” moods could be easily assuaged with a few words of praise or a new hairdo (Coontz 23). The March 7, 1960 issue of *Newsweek* downplayed the unhappiness of women by commenting that the American woman was “dissatisfied with a lot that women of other lands can only dream of” (Friedan 68). For more than fifteen years, American psychiatrists, sociologists, women’s magazines and television shows portrayed the post-World War II housewife as the happiest person on the planet (White 25). To the extent that women believed this to accurately describe everyone else, they felt alone and inadequate.

In February 1955 *Chic* magazine dubbed Francis the “Career Woman-Housewife of the Year,” and printed her demanding schedule that began at 4:30 in the morning and generally lasted until about 1:00 AM. While these puff pieces and interviews were meant to display the exceptionality of Francis as a wife, mother, and entertainer, in reality, they show the staggering demands placed upon female leads in television. By her own account, Francis read two newspapers a day, two or three books a week, studied a dozen magazines a week, attended every Broadway opening, saw seventy-five percent of all movies and attended half a dozen cocktail parties a week (Zolotow 57). In any spare time, she obsessively prepared for interviews. This excessive need for preparation shows that Francis, whether it was conscious or not, recognized her needed to work harder than her male counterparts. By continuously pointing out Francis’ “unique” qualities and “unusual” stamina, these pieces suggest that only she could achieve harmony at work and at home, and that most women would not be capable of these feats. Her level of success was

specific to her and her isolated set of skills. Because of these qualities, Francis was trusted and respected by men, in a way that other female personalities were not. An unidentified high-ranking television performer, said, "It's true. A lot of us didn't treat women as equals in those days. But not Arlene. She was different. She was the best" (Beverly 19). Yet the definition of "the best" was gendered, as is clear from other expressions of admiration from her colleagues. To Steve Allen, she was the "wittiest and prettiest in television," while to Virginia Graham she "made it wonderful to be a woman and especially to be a lady" (Graham 246). Most importantly, for those watching at home, she was "the personification of everything that is lovely in a woman" (Efron 23).

Aside from calling Francis a "career girl," no article or interview detailed the significant strides she made as a woman in television. Instead, interviewers asked her about the existence of jealousy between her and other female personalities, how she managed to stay so thin, and what meals she prepared for her family. Francis, moreover, played into these tropes. For a *TV Guide* shoot, she wore a "waist-trainer" over her dress as she cut vegetables for her family's dinner ("How I Manage"). And in nearly every interview, she insisted that her family, career, and life were glorious. Within these interviews, Francis' quiet struggles appear as she repeatedly contends that both her child and husband are well cared for. Despite Francis' instance that her duties as wife and mother were always more important to her than her career, her son Peter Gabel argues that his mother valued her career as much as she valued family life, but that the times did not allow for her honesty. He notes that his mother was extremely conscious of the "constraints of the second sex," and knew what public image she needed to project (Gabel).

Yet with all her satisfactions and with her great successes, there existed a basic area of conflict that Arlene Francis was never able to resolve: her role as a wife/mother and her role as a performer. The first stems from her conception of the ideal woman, one who is completely devoted to her husband, child, and home. It is not apparent how much of this conception Francis believed, or whether this is an example of her being conscious of her constraints. In January 1956, Francis went to Tokyo to film a series of programs for *Home* dealing with the Japanese New Year. Awed by the Japanese women whom she met, Arlene told her audience that American women could learn much from them about holding on to their husbands. "You can search America backward and forward," she declared, "and not find a woman as comforting, pleasant, and feminine as the Japanese woman. She caters to her man, which American women have forgotten to do" (Zolotow 58). At times,

it seems that Francis actually believed this, and that she thought the ideal woman was one who did not fight for equal rights, accepted this as a “man’s world,” and was happy to defer to masculine power. Perhaps, at times, she cherished a vague dream of becoming a soft, quiescent Mrs. Gabel, receding against the background of her husband’s artistic and social positions. But her desire to hold her own favorable position remained strong, and she never surrendered to the temptation of giving up her multitudinous television, radio, film and theatrical commitments to become this “ideal woman”.

In two intriguing interviews from the late 1950s, Francis revealed some of the complications and contradictions of her public and private life. In a piece published in *TV Radio Mirror*, she described being a wife and mother as her “most important job,” but also noted that being a housewife “doesn’t give me an identity, a place in the world comparable to that of the career woman or working girl.” She continued, “the happiest homes I know- and my own is one- are homes in which the wives and mother have interests other than those contained within their own four walls” (Hall 72). In a second interview with Mike Wallace on ABC’s *The Mike Wallace Interview*, Francis struggled to stay on script as charming and subservient, and gave a series of answers that contradicted one another:

Wallace: What happens to so many career women that makes them so brittle? That makes them almost a kind of third sex. You never find yourself losing your identity as a woman in the, let’s face it, male-dominated world of television?

Francis: [taking a long pause before answering] Well, if I do, those are the times that I’m disappointed in myself. What happens to some of the women, who have these qualities you’ve just spoken of, is that I suppose they feel a very competitive thing with men, and they take on a masculine viewpoint. They forget primarily that they are women...they become aggressive and opinionated. (Wallace)

With this reply, Francis chastised the ways in which women worked toward powerful positions and equality within society and ignored the distinct power and advantages that she had as a wealthy, educated, white woman. Yet moments later she questioned her own assumptions: “Maybe men are not as all-knowing, all-seeing, and all-everything as they think they are. And I think what blundering mistakes they might make are very often covered up by the fact that a very wise woman is behind them to handle it and help them” (Wallace). Towards the end of the interview, she retracted her previous statements by declaring, “I do not think

that it is a woman's position to dominate. I think the admirable thing is when there is compromise and give and take" (Wallace). She found a middle ground, which often was the safest place for a woman in the 1950s.

While the 1950s is considered a period of conformity, where both men and women were expected to observe strict gender roles and comply with societal expectations, in *The Way We Never Were*, Stephanie Coontz notes that the supposed "golden age" of family values, the male breadwinner family of the 1950s, was a short-lived invention. As many Americans view present-day family and gender relations through the foggy lens of nostalgia, they are examining a mostly mythical past. Eugenia Kaledin depicts a more realistic history in *American Women in the 1950s: Mothers and More*, in which she analyzes the importance of women's contributions to society. Women should not only be seen as housewives, but also as active individuals who played a vital part in the construction of cultural life and social activism. Yet, when American families settled down to their favorite evening programming, contented homemakers such as June Cleaver, Harriet Nelson, and Donna Reed dominated. In *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal*, Lynn Spigel argues that early female, television personalities were fantasy women who represented what producers called "morning sex" (81). These women were designed to provide a role model for ordinary housewives, educating them on the "good life," while still appearing down to earth. These shows portrayed the primary roles of white women as wives and mothers. Women were encouraged to stay at home if the family could afford it. Those who chose to work when they did not need the paycheck were often considered selfish, putting themselves before the needs of their family. While society believed women should conform to this role, it is necessary to note that few women assumed this role completely. Sociologists and social commentators argued that by leaving their homes, women were in fact endangering the family by not being there for their children and husbands. Political figures argued that by removing women from the marketplace and having them create a secure home environment, it helped maintain democracy, that there becomes a clear separation of the home sphere and the work sphere. Historians argue that the formulation of these divisions can be attributed to the end of World War II and the emergence of the Cold War.

World War II provided an opportunity for many women to participate in the workforce, but its ending allowed for employers to reestablish the prewar sexual division of labor. In *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960*, Joanne Meyerowitz argues that in order to justify discriminatory

practices against women, popular culture began to create the concept of the proper role for women; “government propaganda, popular magazines, and films reinforced traditional concepts of femininity and instructed women to subordinate their interests to those of returning male veterans” (Meyerowitz 3). The Cold War also provided an impetus for constraints placed on women. In *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*, Elaine Tyler May illuminates the history of “domestic containment;” “It is clear that in the years of the Cold War domestic ideology and Cold War militance rose and fell together” (216). In 1948, Francis defied postwar mores by leaving her husband and eight-month-old baby in California to resume her professional life (Francis 83). Arlene Francis never conformed to the typical homemaker ideal, but she was the woman who indubitably related to discontented housewives. Perhaps this is because Francis struggled to align herself with both pre- and post-war gender values.

While post-World War II America stressed the importance of a one-income household, and, in Elaine Tyler May’s coinage, “domestic containment,” Francis was raised and educated in pre-World War II America. In the 1920s and 1930s American women constituted nearly fifty percent of college students, Francis being one (“Postwar Gender Roles”). After graduating from Mount St. Vincent’s Academy, Francis enrolled in Finch College, a private liberal arts college in New York City. Like many other white, upper-class women, Francis was primarily educated for one reason: to make a great party guest, to be able to hold substantive conversations with men, particularly, of course, her husband. Many women of the 1930s often had education, careers, and sought personal fulfillment. However, after World War II, even this restricted role narrowed. By the mid-fifties, women made up only thirty-eight percent of university students, as social expectations for what constituted a woman’s proper role stressed domesticity (“Postwar Gender Roles”). The majority of television audiences in the 1950s began seeking television shows and personalities that echoed the importance of domesticity, and despite being “non-domestic,” Francis worked to align herself with these beliefs.

As someone who spent her life concerned with pleasing others, Francis faced deep emotional distress. She disclosed that her “frantic” schedule was an “unending chase for lost self-love.” “I very seldom clash with people, because I have trained myself for years” (Francis 75). Francis’ inability to express herself resulted in two great regrets. In the early 60s, she was offered the part of Martha in Edward Albee’s original production of *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* The role promised a weekly salary of \$5,000. An ecstatic Francis told her mother of the offer, who replied,

“Arlene, please don’t ever do a play like that while I am alive” (Francis 26). Even as a self-sustaining, married woman with a child, Francis feared making choices that would garner any disfavor, so she turned down the role. The second great regret happened around the same time. NBC executives approached Francis about hosting *Today*, with Hugh Downs as her co-host. Fearful that the job would cause “too great an upheaval in my relationships with family and friends,” she turned it down (Francis 160). The position went to a then little-known Barbara Walters.

It was not until the late 1970s that Francis expressed any regrets, fears, or distress. In her memoir, she revealed the pains she felt as a mother when a young Peter declared that he wished she were Jewish, like he and his father, so that she would not “go to the studio tomorrow, it’s Rosh Hashonoh [sic],” and when he cried that she had “too many works” (Francis 68). After nearly 30 years of projecting a blissful marriage in which her husband encouraged her confidence and helped mold her stardom, she revealed that the magnitude of her celebrity and her financial power complicated matters. As a child, Peter remembers, “every man that spent more than five minutes with [Francis] wanted to marry her” (Gabel). Despite his own successes, the elder Gabel publicly lived in the shadow of his better-known wife. “In *Who’s Who*, you’ll find me in the Fs- married to Arlene Francis,” he once said (“Actor Martin Gabel”).

The true extent of Francis’ inner turmoil was disclosed during an appearance on *Tonight* with Johnny Carson in 1978. There, she recounted a recurring dream that she experienced for most of her adult life: “I pick up a phone to make a call, and discover it has no mouthpiece. I seek another phone, and it is the same- there is no mouthpiece. In panic, I go from phone booth to phone booth, in and out of rooms, unable to find a telephone with a mouthpiece, frantic in my drive to communicate with someone, anyone.” Francis went on to unveil the transparent conflicts that produced the dream:

I presumed it represents my anxiety about my career as an actress. In a flash of understanding I realized how deeply my inability to express myself...My “don’t makes waves” philosophy had inhibited my life to an incalculable extent. For in my desire to keep things peaceful all the time, I had forgotten that a few waves are necessary to keep the water from becoming stagnant. (“Bert Convy”)

Writing decades later, Francis reflected on the period in which she and *Home* were nominated for Emmy Awards, when she was cited as the most influential woman

in America, and when she saw continuous employment. She had this to say about her unwillingness to fight:

What I've learned...is that if you pull all your energies into being affable and agreeable, it's true that you're going to make a lot of friends, and that part is good. BUT, it is very costly in terms of emotional repression, and that part is bad. I wish somebody would have told me when I was a little girl that the whole world doesn't have to think you're adorable. (Francis 42-3)

Peter Gabel believes that towards the end of his mother's life she "began to see how there could be something important in even the challenges of feminism to her culture," even if she, herself was not suited for radical opposition (Gabel).

Conclusion

Arlene Francis negotiated a place for herself within the gendered hierarchy of American culture, and yet she has largely fallen out of the historical narrative. The Arlene Francis that television viewers watched in the 1950s represented a series of contradictions. She was ambitious and by all accounts achieved four highly successful show-business careers in theater, radio, television, and film. Francis proved that it was not just younger women who could command a national audience in daytime talk, and that the palette of women hosts on the air could include one who operated as an intellectual body. However, she did not march or mobilize, because she was too caught up in the rigidity of her times and too fearful of making enemies. But in her own subtle ways, she helped readjust women's roles in primetime television.

As historians push towards making space for histories that have been overlooked, there appears to be little room for the stories of white, upper-class women. Their assumed lack of struggle keeps their stories hidden. However, when Betty Friedan began writing *The Feminine Mystique* and looking to solve "the problem with no name," she observed women just like Francis, those who were educated, wealthy, but simply encouraged to be the "perfect" housewife. These women were given access to all the wonders of the world, but told they should prefer to stay at home with their children. While these societal ideals did not keep Arlene Francis from success, they greatly impacted the decisions she made, the stories she told, and her problematic self-image. By allowing the fact that these women were privileged to influence whether their history is told, we ensure that

women remain a subset of history rather than integral components. The stories of white women of the 30s, 40s, and 50s do not echo the realities of their male counterparts.

Luckily, historians are no longer dismissing these decades as the “dark ages” for women, arguing that important feminist work happened on both local and national levels (Cassidy 134). But the “wave” metaphor is reductive and problematic when examining these histories. By restricting 20th century feminists’ movements to the first, second, and third waves, it suggests that mainstream feminism is the only kind of feminism there is. It reduces each wave to a stereotype and suggest that there is a sharp division between generations of feminists. Despite this, Barbara Ryan has long argued that “the rebirth of feminism can be traced to the family-centered years” of these decades (41). The women of the 30s, 40s, and 50s were building off of feminism’s first wave and working towards the second, proving that the waves are neither incompatible nor opposed. While Arlene Francis argued against feminism, her existence as a “modern woman” was both influenced by and contributed to the work of the feminist movement.

In this way, Arlene Francis is symbolic of her time and her life offers a nuanced view of the roles of white American women in the 1950s. The fifties did not create sexism or rigidly stratified gender roles, but the time did pressure women to an incalculable extent. The development of the Women’s Movements in the sixties muddled women’s understandings of themselves. After investigating how American society constructed and idealized women, it is possible to understand why Francis partook in this idealization process. Nevertheless, for Francis, like millions of American women, the role of the perfect wife and dedicated mother seemed both unsatisfying and at times disappointing. But not all women made the transition from committed housewife to militant feminist, and their work can still operate as an example for modern women.

Arlene Francis is best remembered today for her nearly twenty-five years on the panel of the game show *What’s My Line?* However, Francis was much more than a game show personality; she was a pioneer and a trailblazer. What Francis achieved in career, far eclipsed her familiarity with guessing occupations and mystery guests. Every woman on television who has fought for an anchor chair or the right to be recognized as a credible voice owes a debt of gratitude to Francis. She helped write the rules for women in television when none existed and suffered immeasurable emotional costs along the way. When Robin Roberts says “good morning” on ABC’s *Good Morning America*, or when Savannah Guthrie sets the

stage for a menu of guests on *Today*, they should offer a salute to Arlene Francis, who walked through the doors and set the stage for every woman in broadcasting who has since followed her.

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