

April 2020

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**THERE'S NO PLACE LIKE HOME:
ARLENE FRANCIS AND DOMESTICITY IN DOUBT**

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

in

The Department of History

by

Caroline Elizabeth Argrave
B.A., Louisiana State University, 2017
May 2020

For my grandparents, Janie and Mel. Your refusal to watch any programming outside of the *Game Show Network* and the *Westerns Channel* impacted my life incalculably.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Throughout my coursework and the writing of this thesis, I have received invaluable support and guidance from my advisor, Professor Charles Shindo, and my committee members, Professor Meredith Veldman and Professor Catherine Jacquet. I appreciate your constant support and the wealth of ideas that you shared with me. I am most grateful for my mother, father and brother who not only supported me in my research and travel, but also comforted me when I was overwhelmed. And to my four-legged writing companion, Delilah, thanks for making this process bearable.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the life and career of stage, film, and television personality Arlene Francis, in order to add nuance to the understanding of how women broke into the entertainment industry. Francis, rather than brazenly flouting norms, wooed her employers and audience into acceptance by combining her prominent new “power” with comforting old-fashioned norms. The result was a woman doing something patently new while speaking in a way disarmingly familiar. In this way, Francis is reminiscent of other female pioneers, who used a traditionally feminine persona to charm their male colleagues into supporting their leadership, and as a result has been underappreciated by the latter-day champions of women’s advancement.

INTRODUCTION

No phenomenon shaped America life in the 1950s more than television. For a nation once plagued by strong regional differences, network television programming blurred these distinctions and worked to forge a national popular culture. A handful of networks produced programs and personalities that influenced viewers and changed the cultural landscape. Nearly a decade into the “television age,” in 1959, American journalist Mike 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.”¹ For nearly thirty years, Arlene Francis appeared regularly on television alongside Mike Wallace, Edward R. Murrow, and Jack Paar, and thus helped establish the concept of television talk shows. By 1954, Francis achieved the rare position of being contracted to all the three major networks, ABC, CBS and NBC, a feat which alone should cement her place in media history. Among early television talk-show hosts and personalities, only Edward R. Murrow is represented by more programs at the Museum of Television and Radio.² Referring to Francis as “the first lady of television, the July 1954 issue of *Newsweek* declared hers “the most recognized face in America,” deemed Francis as important as Mamie Eisenhower and Eleanor Roosevelt, and asserted that Arlene was to television viewers what Willie Mays was to baseball fans.³

¹ Arlene Francis, interviewed by Mike Wallace, 1959.

² Bernard M. Timberg, *Television Talk: A History of the TV Talk Show* (Austin, TX.: University of Texas Press, 2002), 40.

³ “Arlene Francis: The Quick Queen of Television,” *Newsweek* 19 July 1954: 23-24.

From 1949 to 1975 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 nearly 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 what companies were running what or narrating the history of prime-time male stars. Historians, whether coming from a textual, personal, or national approach have tended to shape American television history solely from the network or executive perspective. Therefore, a great deal of the history of early television is documented not in works of television studies, but rather in studies of the technological history and on the history of related male individuals and the institutions they ran. Such studies offer a wealth of information but are often written outside the necessary critical and cultural discourses. This history is so isolating that Marsha Cassidy and Mimi White argue that American audiences have forgotten a number of pioneering women.⁴

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 of these men and the early years of television but offer little gender analysis. Gary R. Edgerton's *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, tracing the history of

⁴ Marsha Cassidy and Mimi White, "Innovating Women's Television in Local and National Networks: Ruth Lyons and Arlene Francis," *Camera Obscura* 15, no. 17 (2002): 32.

television news from the grim seriousness of Edward R. Murrow and Walter Cronkite to the snarkiness of Jon Stewart and Bill O'Reilly. By strictly focusing on evening news programming, Ponce de Leon subverts the significance of day-time news programs that were often headed by female personalities. Because even these nuanced television histories fail to expand across the lines of gender, a great deal of women's entertainment history is told inaccurately. For years, articles and interviews have examined *Tonight* and comedienne 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 took a seat behind the desk. In fact, Francis was Jack Paar's favorite sit-in, 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.⁵ Similarly, in 2017 the *New York Times* reported that actress and comedienne Rose Marie was the first female game show host in American television history. This is false; Francis was the first. The lack of readily available information about women's work in the early days of television, allows for inaccuracies like these to creep into the historical record.

Second, Arlene Francis is an uncomfortable person to examine. Hardly an ideal feminist heroine, she often urged women to stop dominating men and declared that a woman's main role in life was to cater to and serve her husband. Francis thus seems to have willingly and willfully fulfilled the female stereotype of the 1950s. Yet, if viewed from another angle, her career constitutes an important steppingstone toward a more enlightened era. Her life echoes the constrained and often suffocating lives of white women in the 1950s, while also showcasing the

⁵ Timberg, *Television Talk*, 295. The Internet Movie Database, IMDB, provides a list of *Tonight* airings. She hosted the latter a total of thirty-six times and took over the position as host during Jack Paar's departure and Johnny Carson's instatement.

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.⁶ 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. 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 with the happy homemaker mother of the 1950s, was a short-lived invention. As many Americans view current family and gender relations through the distorted lens of nostalgia, they are examining a mostly mythical past. E. 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 of the 1950s should not be viewed solely as housewives; they were active individuals who played a vital part in the construction of cultural life and social activism.

⁶ Dyllan McGee (Producer), Barak Goodman (Director). (2013). *Makers: Women Who Make America* [Documentary]. United States: PBS.

Yet, when American families settled down to their favorite evening programming, contented, television homemakers such as June Cleaver, Harriet Nelson, and Donna Reed reigned supreme. In *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal*, Lynn Spigel argues that early female, television personalities were fantasy women created to represent what producers called “morning sex.”⁷ 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 who were fully satisfied. While society believed women should conform to this role, it is necessary to note that few women assumed this role completely. Still, the idea that work was something for women to “fall back on” was widespread and many presumed that women only worked if necessary. Those who chose to work when they did not need the paycheck were often considered selfish, putting themselves before the needs of their family. Sociologists and social commentators of the time such as Carl C. Zimmerman argued for the persistence of the traditional family, and that by leaving their homes, women failed to be adequate caretakers for their children and husbands. Political figures argued that removing women from the marketplace and having them create a secure home environment helped maintain democracy; that there becomes a clear separation of the home sphere and the work sphere.⁸ 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 many women access to participate in the workforce, but this was only temporary as its ending allowed for employers to reestablish the prewar sexual division of

⁷ Lynn Spigel, *Make Room For TV: Television and the Family Ideal* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1992), 81.

⁸ Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1988), 74

labor. In *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960*, Joanne Meyerowitz argues that in order to justify discriminatory, popular culture marketed the concept of the “proper” role for women. As she argues, “government propaganda, popular magazines, and films reinforced traditional concepts of femininity and instructed women to subordinate their interests to those of returning male veterans.”⁹ 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,” arguing that “it is clear that in the years of the Cold War domestic ideology and Cold War militance rose and fell together.”¹⁰ The nation supported the belief that women remained the same across decades, always satisfied with being the perfect housewife and mother. While Arlene Francis never conformed to the typical homemaker ideal, she became 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.

Arlene Francis is best remembered today for her nearly twenty-five years on the panel of the game show *What's My Line?*, because even seventy years after the shows' premiere, it is still broadcast daily. However, Francis was much more than a game show personality; she was a pioneer, a trailblazer and is painfully symbolic of her time. Examination of Francis' life and career offers a corrective history about the place of women in 1950s television. While early television, and arguably television today, offered a flawed and sexist portrayal of women, it is important to note that the best remembered and most celebrated shows of the 1950s and 1960s

⁹ Joanne Meyerowitz, *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960* (Philadelphia, PA.: Temple University Press, 1994), 3.

¹⁰ Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound*, 216.

are not representative of all programming. Television history is much more than what is easily accessible through network reruns. Women were often large components of daytime television, and because these programs were broadcast live with little thought given to preservation, these programs fell out of circulation and therefore have been overlooked and undervalued historically. Some of these early, important works are available through television archives such as the Museum of Broadcast Communication or the Paley Center, and they provide important examples of how women, even in small ways, worked to escape the domestic stereotypes, redefine gender roles and break professional barriers.

CHAPTER 1. WHAT'S HER NAME?

Arline Francis Kazanjian was born in 1907 in Boston, Massachusetts, the daughter of Aram and Leah. 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.¹¹ 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."¹² "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."¹³ 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.¹⁴ In 1932, she made her film debut in *Murders in the Rue Morgue* playing a prostitute opposite Bela Lugosi's mad scientist. Francis had a few early breaks doing voice-over work for radio ads, which eventually turned into a job voicing a character on the radio soap opera *King Arthur's Round Table*. Her knack for eloquent,

¹¹ Arlene Francis, *Arlene Francis: A Memoir* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978), 9.

¹² Arlene Francis, interviewed by Mike Wallace, 1959.

¹³ Francis, *Arlene Francis*, 15.

¹⁴ Francis, *Arlene Francis*, 21.

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 where she would imitate famous personalities, she held this role for eleven years. That same year she became a member of Orson Welles' distinguished acting troupe the Mercury Theater, performing in *Danton's Death* and *Horse Eats Hat*.¹⁵ Taken by Francis' talent, Welles cast her in his silent film *Too Much Johnson*, opposite Joseph Cotton, and in his *Mercury Theater on the Air* series.¹⁶ In 1940, she began playing Betty opposite to Van Hefflin's Bob in the soap opera *Betty and Bob*. Three years later she became the first female game show host in history, 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.¹⁷



Photo promoting the What's My Name? radio show. Arlene Francis is pictured. 19 August 1948. ABC Radio. This work is in the public domain of the United States because it was published in the United States between 1925 and 1977 without a copyright notice.

¹⁵ The Mercury Theater was a repertory theater company founded in 1937 by Orson Welles and producer John Houseman. Founding members included Ray Collins, Joseph Cotton, George Coulouris, Martin Gabel, Norman Lloyd Agnes Moorehead and Everette Sloane. This company produced one most infamous radio broadcasts of all time, "The War of the Worlds," in 1938.

¹⁶ Francis, *Arlene Francis*, 30

¹⁷ Peter Gabel, interviewed by author, January 10, 2019.

From 1942 to 1944 Arlene starred as a Russian sniper, patterned loosely on Ludmilla Pavlechenko, in what is considered her greatest Broadway success, George S. Kaufman's production of *The Doughgirls*, which ran for nearly 700 performances.¹⁸ Despite *Look Magazine* declaring that she "walked away with the show," it was during this period that Francis learned the consequences of stepping outside conventionally accepted gender boundaries and suffered a "breakdown."¹⁹ In 1935, after continued pressure from her parents to marry and become a "good housewife," she married Neil Agnew, an executive for Paramount Pictures. After nine years within a "loveless" marriage, Francis expressed to her husband and parents her desire for a divorce. Following this request, she was institutionalized. It was common for women to be sent to asylums as an alternative for divorce. These institutions operated as prisons for "non-compliant" women.²⁰ It was believed that her desire for divorce stemmed from the rigors of her work schedule, and her family remained convinced that she would return to normal after some "good rest" at the LeRoy Sanitarium.²¹ She walked away from her numerous radio jobs but left the hospital every night to continue her appearance in *The Doughgirls*. New York State denied Francis' divorce request, and her experiences echo the reality that many women seeking divorce in the 1940s faced in America.

New York functioned as an "at fault" state, meaning that cruel and inhumane treatment, such as abandonment, abuse, or adultery, had to be present and significant enough to warrant a

¹⁸ Kaufman's production opened at the Lyceum Theater on Decemebr 30, 1942. The cast included Arleen Whelan, Natalie Schafer and Virginia Field. Francis' other early Broadway credits include *All That Glitters*, *The Walking Gentlemen*, *The Overtons*, *The Little Blue Light*, and the original production of *The Women*.

¹⁹ "Arlene Francis: TV's Busiest Woman," *Look* 4 May 1956: 56; Francis, *Arlene Francis*, 51.

²⁰ Elayne Clift, *Women's Encounters with the Mental Health Establishment* (New York: Haworth Press, 2002), 15.

²¹ Francis, *Arlene Francis*, 55.

divorce.²² In situations that involved children, the wife was encouraged to stay in the marriage in spite of any abuse she faced. Since Agnew was neither cruel nor inhumane in his treatment of Francis and was both wealthy and attractive, the court suggested that she remain married. Eventually, Agnew conceded to Francis, and they flew to Juarez, Mexico, where they obtained a divorce that was never recognized by the state of New York.²³ Through this experience, Francis learned the value of portraying herself as a charming, capable person, willing to concede to men. It would be through her “submission” that she would exercise real power and the ability to manipulate situations in her favor. Most importantly she learned the benefits of keeping her emotional turmoil deeply hidden, as there were real consequences for women who expressed their dissatisfaction. When Francis displayed her vulnerabilities and frustrations, she was dismissed as a woman working unnecessarily hard. Over time, Francis would learn to use her excessive workload as an escape from her personal troubles and insecurities.

During her chores on the radio serial *Big Sister*, Francis met actor Martin Gabel. When Orson Welles staged *Danton’s Death* on Broadway, featuring Gabel, Francis was hired for a small role upon Gabel’s request. According to Francis, her relationship with Gabel blossomed out of Welles innovative mind. Welles cut a hole in the center of the stage so that part of the stage could be lowered to change a scene, while actors on the stage played around the opening. It was while they waited in the dark, dank basement, of the Mercury Theater, that Martin and Arlene grew close. In May of 1946, Francis married Gabel, and in 1947 the Gabels welcomed

²² Nicholas Confessore, “N.Y. Moves Closer to No-Fault Divorce,” *New York Times* 15 June 2010: A1.

²³ Francis, *Arlene Francis*, 60.

their only child, a son named Peter.²⁴ Gabel, famed for his radio voice-overs, worked as both an actor and producer in the theater and movies, often producing plays starring his wife. Gabel directed his wife on her business affairs, and Francis always sought her husband's advice. Throughout her life she insisted that it was Gabel who helped form her "public person." Francis credited Gabel with introducing her to a bright, sophisticated group of notables in New York, a group in which she felt both at home and yet insecure.

Together, Francis and Gabel attended parties with theater and literary figures such as George Kaufman, Moss Hart, Noel Coward, and Richard Rodgers. Despite years of friendship and social acceptance, Francis admitted that she never felt comfortable. *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."²⁵ 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."²⁶ 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."²⁷ When he accepted his Tony award for *Big Fish, Little Fish*,

²⁴ Gabel and Francis could not marry in New York, so they traveled to New Jersey for a marriage license. Famed American columnist Walter Winchell arranged their marriage ceremony.

²⁵ Richard Gehman, "The Amazing Armenian," *TV Guide* 23 June 1962: 28.

²⁶ "Arlene Francis, Martin Gabel Husband, Wife Team of Year," *Laurel Leader Call* 7 June 1961: 10.

²⁷ Francis, *Arlene Francis*, 66.

he said, “This is the first prize I’ve won since Arlene Francis consented to be my wife.”²⁸ 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. Because the unstable world of television mirrored the unpredictable atmosphere of radio work, the people who were most likely to succeed in early television were those with experience in live broadcasting situations- and most of these people were men. Men such as 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 and her “unconventional” beauty: “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.”²⁹ However, in 1948, Francis defied postwar mores by leaving her husband and eight-month-old baby in California, where the Gabels had temporarily moved for Martin’s film career, to resume her professional life in New York City.³⁰ Shortly after, 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 the crucial experience and training of having been a personality in front of a live audience and with, therefore, a high level of credibility with audiences at home. She knew the importance of talking *to* an audience, not *at* them.

In February of 1950 Francis appeared on what was intended to be a short-summer replacement game show called *What’s My Line?* However, the show’s immediate high ratings

²⁸ Francis, *Arlene Francis*, 66.

²⁹ Arlene Francis, interviewed by Mike Wallace, 1959.

³⁰ Francis, *Arlene Francis*, 83.

cemented its place within CBS's permanent lineup. For nearly seventeen years Francis starred on this panel show along with other New York intellectuals, including columnist Dorothy Kilgallen, Random House publisher Bennett Cerf and comedians Steve Allen and Fred Allen. The show was hosted by *ABC News* executive John Charles Daly. Every Sunday night, the foursome would play a quasi-version of twenty questions in order to determine the contestant's line of work. They were then blindfolded and tasked with identifying the weekly celebrity "mystery guests," who ranged from Lucille Ball to Jesse Owens.³¹ In 1953, Francis also began hosting the talent show *Talent Patrol* (a.k.a. *Soldier Parade*) for ABC. She gained respect as a television personality for her charm, elegant appearance, and tasteful wit. Very few people were equipped to handle the instability of early, live television, but Francis' intellect and ability to absorb information quickly and deliver it in a palatable way transcended the confines of gender and age. Because of these qualities, in early 1954, Francis became the nationally acclaimed host of *Home*, one of the most successful female oriented information shows of the 1950s, establishing Francis as a founder of television talk shows.

³¹ What's My Line? is a creation of the game show duo Mark Goodson and Bill Todman. It aired on CBS from 1950 to 1967. After its CBS cancellation in 1967, it returned in syndication from 1968-1975, making it the longest-running U.S. primetime network television game show. What's My Line? won three Emmy Awards for "Best Quiz or Audience Participation Show" and one Golden Globe for "Best TV Show."

CHAPTER 2.

HOME: AN ELECTRONIC MAGAZINE FOR WOMEN



Arlene Francis displays a scale model of "The House that HOME built" on NBC-TV network show, "Home." Image courtesy of NAHB Archive, NAHB Correlator, October 1955.

In February 1954, NBC spent \$1,000,000 on advanced promotion and advertising for the March 1st television premiere of *Home*. The appropriated amount was the largest in television history for a single program.³² 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."³³ 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

³² "\$1,000,000 'Home' Bally," *Variety* 3 February 1954: 27.

³³ "House that Home Built" Advertisement, *Variety* 5 December 1957: 32.

through Friday, NBC delivered the “queen” of homemaking shows with Arlene Francis as the first female “editor-in-chief.”

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.³⁴ The host would be tasked with the difficult job of appealing to housewives of all ages, while refraining from intimidating any male viewership. Two hundred women, including actresses 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.”³⁵ 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.”³⁶ With Arlene Francis, *Home* offered the “greatest daytime attraction of the medium.”³⁷

Home was one of the most intelligent and lively mixes of daily journalism, information, and political discussions ever aired. The show 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, maintained forty sponsors, received 500 phone calls a day, 5,000 letters a week, had a production budget of \$50,000 a week,

³⁴ Toby Miller, *Television: Critical Concepts in Media and Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge Publishers, 2003), 106.

³⁵ “What is her line?” *TV Guide* 9 July 1954: 56.

³⁶ Edith Efron, “Arlene Francis Dazzles You with Footwork,” *TV Guide* 18 June 1966: 23.

³⁷ Inger L. Stole, “There is no place like Home: NBC’s search for a daytime audience, 1954-1957” *The Communication Review* 2, no. 2 (2009): 137-139.

and employed seven female editors.³⁸ *Home*'s technologically advanced set was created to attract women who were bored of 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."³⁹ Research proved that nearly half of women in the country were not watching other daytime programming.⁴⁰

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."⁴¹ The March 29th 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.⁴² 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." 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."⁴³ While the groundbreaking set drew millions of housewives to viewership, Arlene Francis maintained that *Home* would offer substantive content.

³⁸ Stole, "There is no place like Home," 137-139.

³⁹ Irv Broughton, *Producers on Producing: The Making of Film and Television* (London: McFarland and Company Inc., 1986) 215.

⁴⁰ Broughton, *Producers on Producing*, 216.

⁴¹ Cassidy, *What Women Watched*, 150.

⁴² *Time* 29 March 1954: 50.

⁴³ "A \$200,000 Home," *Television Age* April 1954: 15.

Besides Francis, *Home* employed six other female editors: Poppy Cannon of the *Ladies Home Journal* as food editor; psychologist Dr. Rose Franzblau, family relations and child psychology editor; television personality, Eve Hunter as fashion and beauty editor; Sydney Smith, interior decorating editor; then unknown actress, Estelle Parsons as special projects editor; and Commissioner of New York City's Department of Health, Leona Baumgartner as health editor. Together, this team of female experts allowed *Home* to relay information to female viewers in a palatable and interactive manner, one in which women were capable of making important decisions and doing impactful work. Will Peigelbeck was the single male editor who specialized in gardening and home repairs. A relatively unknown Hugh Downs operated as the show's announcer and co-host to Francis. In a 1997 interview Downs remembered Francis as "a reasonable person," "she projected a personality that was essential in those times in television"⁴⁴ Of Francis' interview style, Downs commented that Arlene was the "least hierarchical person." He admired her ability to interview housewives with the "same attention and respect that she did Richard Nixon." He continued that "some of the most exhilarating years" of his life "were the years with Arlene on *Home*."⁴⁵

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."⁴⁶ 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

⁴⁴ Hugh Downs, interviewed by Bill Tynan, October 22, 1997.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Arlene Francis, interviewed by Mike Wallace, 1959.

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. Despite these interviews constituting a major success for both *Home* and Francis, her insecurities concerning her abilities as a capable, female leader persisted. When preparing for an interview with a powerful male leader, Francis urged her husband Martin Gabel to write the interview questions for her, as “meeting so many generals, admirals, and powerful men is a little overpowering for a girl.”⁴⁷

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.”⁴⁸ Francis traveled so that viewers isolated in their homes could access people and cultures outside of their own. Happening before the advent of videotape, remotely filmed episodes of *Home* were shot on reel-footage and immediately flown to New York for broadcasting. *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 with her son Peter, and on top of a “Cat Cracker” oil processor in

⁴⁷ Peter Gabel, interviewed by author, January 10, 2019; “Home Away From Home,” *Time* 2 May 1955: 68.

⁴⁸ Timberg, *Television Talk*, 41.

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. As she recalled, “I blew the whistle and all these men came charging out of their offices and started making money.”⁴⁹ 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.”⁵⁰ This one statement echoes Francis’ concerns about her own career and image. Like Smith, Francis’ personal desires led her to work outside of culturally accepted female spheres. And being one of the first women to do so, Francis seems to have feared losing her innate femininity. However, Francis’ acceptance and pleasure with her femininity is precisely what allowed her to gain access to the “male” world. 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.”⁵¹

While Francis never wavered from her goal to provide worthwhile content for housewives, many of her news segments were circumvented by a striking emphasis on homemaking and consumerism. In 1955, *Home* began an expensive campaign intended to convince home builders across the country to build Joseph Eichler styled homes. The program incorporated a segment called “The House that *Home* Built,” which appeared regularly, to persuade Americans that glass-walled, low gabled, modern homes could be built anywhere, not just California. The “House that *Home* Built” was co-sponsored by NBC and the National

⁴⁹ “The Perils of Arlene,” *Time* 9 September 1957: 85.

⁵⁰ Cassidy, *What Women Watched*, 143.

⁵¹ Peter Gabel, interviewed by author, January 10, 2019.

Association of Home Builders.⁵² Not even Francis' improvisational humor and controlled delivery could assuage the awkward transition from serious news to the rolling out of mini-model versions of Eichler homes.

Similarly, the November 12, 1956 broadcast displayed the difficulties of maintaining a program that was deeply enmeshed with both information and consumerism. While Francis delivered information on the General Federation of Women's Clubs, she was abruptly interrupted by a producer and instructed to read a news bulletin concerning the Suez Crisis. "Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjold said that Egypt has just accepted the United Nations Police Force," she read.⁵³ In typical *Home* ordering, Francis quickly switched to a segment that highlighted "adult party clothes" and a fashion show, during which sewing expert Lucille Rivers told viewers, "Why not be feminine and exciting too? You'll feel like a doll and look pretty too." The change in these modes of address, as Francis moved from breaking international news to sewing tips, characterizes *Home's* endorsement of multiple femininities as transitional balancing act. If one segment encouraged women to be politically informed and active in public affairs, it was quickly followed by one that reminded viewers of their status as vivacious, feminine dolls. If anything, these different modes provide insight into the duality that informed Francis' work and her public person.

Home, more than any other of outlet of her career, allowed Francis to fulfill her domestic duties, even though her representation of a domestic life was simply a performance. For example, during a commercial skit promoting DuPont products, Francis and a young girl are

⁵² Robert McLaughlin, "The House that 'Home' Built," Eichlernetwork.com.

⁵³ "November 12, 1956," *Home*, NBC, 1956.

dressed in matching DuPont nylon bathrobes in what appears to be the child's bedroom.⁵⁴ It's bedtime, and the girl takes off her robe as Francis tucks her into bed. Then, in a sequence typical on *Home*, the camerawork proceeds to nullify the bedroom mirage, cutting to a tracking shot that follows Francis straight across the diameter of *Home*'s arena, the bedroom set behind her revealed as a staged fiction. *Home* was never really a home. The Manhattanite Francis always existed outside the world of the main streets of America, and her custom-made Arnold Scassi couture and expensive jewelry she wore on *Home*, signaled her class status. Yet her daily domiciliary performances on live television cemented her status with housewives, and probably assuaged Francis' own personal qualms about her domestic shortcomings.

Home is often noted for pioneering the “magazine” concept of advertising in which broadcasters and not advertisers are placed in charge of editorial content. Weaver knew that *Home*'s format would attract small-ticket advertisers of women's products, which had traditionally only been featured in magazines. Major sponsors included Sunbeam appliances, Dow-Corning cookware, Hallite utensils, and Crosley television sets.⁵⁵ These sponsorships also resulted in major print-ad campaigns centered on Francis' domestic life. During this period, ads portrayed women as submissive, purely domestic creatures, those co-created with *Home* were no different. These ads captured Francis painting her house with Glidden's new satin spread, lounging with her husband on her Firestone Foamex couch, filling her Youngstown Kitchen cabinets with groceries, but most often, they pictured Francis tending to her son. The charm, warmth and motherliness of these advertisements counterbalanced the sophistication of Francis' high-brow image. Still, Francis often seemed out of character carrying out her mundane

⁵⁴ “September 21, 1954,” *Home*, NBC, 1954.

⁵⁵ Cassidy, *What Women Watched*, 135.

saleswoman duties; a celebrated Broadway actress modeling a party hat constructed out of aluminum foil.

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."⁵⁶ Yet, sponsors praised Francis for her abilities to "integrate programming content, personal charm, and selling" and coined her "Saleswoman of the Year."⁵⁷ 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.⁵⁸ Even some 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."⁵⁹ In contrast, Marsha Cassidy argues that despite being called *Home*, the show and Francis offered "a striking validation of nondomestic behavior."⁶⁰

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 a \$3,500 potential earning depending on weekly sponsorship.⁶¹ *Variety* reported that she signed a percentage deal in which she could earn

⁵⁶ Jack Gould, "Home," *New York Times* 28 July 1954: A4.

⁵⁷ Cassidy and White, "Innovating," 41; Efron, "Arlene Francis Dazzles," 24.

⁵⁸ Stole, "There is no place," 115.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 114.

⁶⁰ Cassidy, *What Women Watched*, 149.

⁶¹ "Inside Stuff-Radio-TV," *Variety* 10 February 1954: 44.

\$100,000 a year from *Home*.⁶² 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."⁶³ 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."⁶⁴

Yet, her power was limited. Francis had no financial control over *Home* or any of the other shows that she appeared on. In a world in which women were essentially hired hands, Francis was required to do the bidding of the men in charge. Despite *Home*'s focus on women, the 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 started employing unnecessary additions. Hugh Downs, *Home*'s announcer and co-host, recalled that one low-ranking producer employed six secretaries.⁶⁵ 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," while Jack Cluett commented that American homes will "never be the same now that Arlene Francis and her TV household helpers are here."⁶⁶ 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."⁶⁷ Ultimately, internal tensions

⁶² "\$1,000,000 'Home' Bally," *Variety* 3 February 1954: 27.

⁶³ "TV Pay Envelopes," *TV Guide* 18 February 1956: 5.

⁶⁴ "The Perils of Arlene," *Time* 9 September 1957: 85.

⁶⁵ Hugh Downs, interviewed by Bill Tynan, October 22, 1997.

⁶⁶ Jack Gould, "Home," *New York Times* 28 July 1954: A4; Jack Cluett "No Place Like Home," *Woman's Day* June 1954: 12.

⁶⁷ Anton Remenih, "TV's New Home Show Upsets Life at Home," *Chicago Tribune* 28 March 1954: 191.

between *Home*'s creator 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 rested on the show's "ambitious, educational programming."⁶⁸ Mike Wallace suggested *Home*, which maintained one of the largest budgets of any NBC program, was cancelled once NBC realized they could spend less money and still keep a steady audience.⁶⁹ After a whirlwind four years, the final episode of *Home* aired on August 9, 1957.

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 its stronghold. Both Francis and *Home* showcased the struggle between power and passivity. This duality displayed the inescapable conflict between the ideals of an earlier time of activism, and a revised set of norms for the 1950s that attempted to collapse women's political ambitions into the performance of domestic duties. Overall, Francis' efforts offer insight into how white-women managed their internal conflicts and negotiated power for themselves within male-dominated spheres. While historical accounts have long acknowledged the significance and durability of the *Today* and *Tonight* shows, *Home*'s early cancellation branded the program a failure, and its historical importance has only recently been revived.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Arlene Francis, interviewed by Mike Wallace, 1959.

⁶⁹ Ibid; Stole 115.

⁷⁰ Cassidy, *What Women Watched*, 133.

Following the cancellation of *Home*, NBC announced plans for *The Arlene Francis Show*, a half-hour replacement series with a much-reduced budget. Both Hugh Downs and Norman Paris followed Francis to the new series. Much like *Home*, *The Arlene Francis Show* was a mid-morning daytime talk show that was a mixture of friendly chats with celebrities and features centered around the home and family life. Again, Francis displayed her quick transitional abilities as best viewed in the December 13, 1957 show. Within seconds she moves from a serious interview with anthropologist Ashley Montagu about marital problems into a song and dance routine performed with Earl Wrightson.⁷¹ While *The Arlene Francis Show* ran for only 140 episodes before its cancellation in 1958, Francis frequently appeared on NBC substituting for hosts on *Today* and *Tonight*, and remained a prominent featured on the covers of *TV Guide*, *Look Magazine*, *Cosmopolitan* and *Newsweek*.



Photo from the 15th anniversary of the television game show *What's My Line?*. The original panelists and host were still with the program at the time. Panelists from left-Arlene Francis, Bennett Cerf, Dorothy Kilgallen. Standing is the host, John Charles Daly. 29 January 1965. CBS Television. This work is in the public domain in the United States because it was published in the United States between 1925 and 1977 without a copyright notice.

Despite her success as a TV personality, Francis never lost her love for acting. After *The Arlene Francis Show*'s cancellation, playwright Harry Kurnitz cast Francis in his original

⁷¹ "December 13, 1957," *The Arlene Francis Show*, NBC, 1957.

production of *Once More, With Feeling*, starring opposite her old acting partner Joseph Cotton and Walter Matthau. The show ran for nearly a year and the *New York Times* praised Francis for her “warm and witty” performance.⁷² Francis continued as a fixture on CBS’s *What’s My Line?* where she mingled with the biggest names in entertainment, until it was finally taken off the air in 1975.⁷³ She also starred in several films, including Billy Wilder’s *One, Two, Three* (1961), playing opposite James Cagney and Norman Jewison’s *The Thrill of It All* (1963) with Doris Day and James Garner.⁷⁴ Francis began delivering *Voice of America* commentaries which reportedly reached seventy-five million listeners.⁷⁵ During this period she authored two bestselling books: *That Certain Something: The Magic of Charm* (1960) and *No Time for Cooking* (1961). Both books highlighted Francis’ domestic skills and unparalleled charm.

It was also during the early 1960s that Francis faced what the papers called an “unlucky streak,” that deeply impacted her personal life.⁷⁶ In June of 1960, a dumbbell, which had been placed on the window sill by a maid, fell out the window from the eighth floor of the Gabel’s Ritz Tower apartment, striking a man and killing him instantly. Francis refused to return to her

⁷² Brooks Atkinson, “Theater: ‘Once More, With Feeling,’” *New York Times* 22 October 1958: 39.

⁷³ Francis was the only principle cast member to follow *What’s My Line?* into syndication. Of her his mother’s association with the program Peter Gabel said “If anybody on that panel would have wanted to be known for *What’s My Line?*, it would have to be mother. It was such a perfect vehicle for her to express the inherent warmth, humor and wit of her particular public personality. And maybe that’s why she was the only one from the original show who continued it.” Peter Gabel interviewed by W. Gary Wetstein, 19 April 2018.

⁷⁴ In *One, Two, Three* Francis played Phyllis MacNamara, the wife of a high-ranking Coca-Cola executive stationed in West Berlin. In *The Thrill of It All*, Francis played Mrs. Fraleigh an older woman who struggles with infertility until she heeds the advice of her new obstetrician, James Garner.

⁷⁵ Marian Christy, “Insecurity is a Struggle of Ms. Francis’ Life,” *The Salina Journal* 23 June 1978: 12.

⁷⁶ Christina Kirk, “TV’s Unlucky Star,” *The Orlando Sentinel* 1 September 1963: 22E

home for two weeks and was ordered by New York's Supreme Court to pay \$175,000 in damages.⁷⁷ In May of 1963, on an overcast day, Francis was involved in a car accident on Northern State Parkway while returning to New York for her *What's My Line?* appearance, after a long day of rehearsal at the Mineola Playhouse in Long Island. Francis sustained major injuries such as a broken collar bone, gash to her scalp and concussion, but her emotional wounds were much worse. The wreck involved four cars, one containing a young family. The mother was killed instantly, leaving the father and young daughter in critical condition. Following a two-week hospitalization and a two-year court battle, Francis paid \$210,000 in damages.⁷⁸ For a woman who built her entire career on having everyone like her, these events inevitably impacted Francis psychologically. For the rest of her life, she refused to open her apartment windows and refused to drive.

Starting in 1960, Francis began a top-rated daily radio interview program on WOR, also entitled *The Arlene Francis Show* but often referred to as *Luncheon at Sardis*, where she consistently booked hard-to-get, high-profile guests. For this program, Francis appeared live from a booth at Sardis restaurant on West 44th street in New York City. She spoke to guests from all walks of life, opening the run with actor Rock Hudson, and continuing with everyone from Frank Sinatra to Martin Luther King Jr. Just as on television, Francis was known for her pleasant, relaxed interviewing style. Her radio producer, Jean Bach, recalled suggesting that Francis ask guest Barry Goldwater about gun control policy. Francis refused, out of fear that it might ruffle too many feathers. "I used to call her jokingly America's sweetheart, because she

⁷⁷ Kirk, "TV's Unlucky Star," 22E.

⁷⁸ Ibid, 22E.

didn't want to offend anybody," Bach said.⁷⁹ From 1981 to 1986, Francis hosted a syndicated television show *The Prime of Your Life*, where she interviewed both older celebrities and civilians who remained active in spite of their age.

Despite being named 1984's Broadcaster of the Year, Francis' WOR program was cancelled in March of 1984, resulting in Francis' first major career firing. Due to management change, all "older" hosts were fired. Despite her show's continued high ratings, Francis' age of seventy-seven and her substantial salary made her expendable. Francis alluded that this was the great shock of her life, as it forced her to become conscious of how dependent her career had been on male power in ways that were "unjust and disempower[ing]" to her.⁸⁰ Following the WOR cancellation and Martin Gabel's death in 1986, Francis began displaying signs of Alzheimer's disease. She left New York in 1995 to live in a retirement home in San Francisco to be closer to her son. Francis died on May 31, 2001, at the age of 93.

Francis is remembered as a popular and respected television personality who pioneered challenging programming designed for women. Historian Bernard Timberg writes that her work must be seen in a historical context: "Her career also illustrates the importance of power and control in the role of a 1950's talk-show host, and the uphill battle faced by a woman host during this time."⁸¹ For a charming personality, she was also a visionary, she spoke with confidence on the need for restructuring the way television programming was financed and distributed to the public. Above all, she was a proponent of the industry itself, saying, "The good that television can do and does do is so enormous that I think we have to put up with the rest of it... You know

⁷⁹ Daniel J. Wakin, "Arlene Francis, 93, Mainstay of 'What's My Line?' on TV," *New York Times* 2 June 2001: B7.

⁸⁰ Peter Gabel, interviewed by author, January 10, 2019.

⁸¹ Timberg, *Television Talk*, 39.

people that are going around knocking it forget that we are really growing ... we are still such children still crawling in this industry.”⁸²

⁸² Arlene Francis, interviewed by Mike Wallace, 1959.

CHAPTER 3. Housewife and Homemaker?

During the 1950s and 1960s television programs were governed by strict codes of ethics and network censorship. Like radio broadcasters, television personalities operated under the authority of the Federal Communications Commission, the FCC. Obscene programming was prohibited at all times. Married couples sharing a bed, the word pregnant, and references to toilets were all deemed obscene. Most programs were even subjected to strict dress codes; evening attire was essential for evening programming. By and large, both television and radio stars followed the standards and practices of broadcasting, whether live or taped. However, within the Television and Radio Museum and the Internet Archive, there exists dozens of examples of Arlene Francis slightly subverting these standards and challenging societal expectations about women. In *Survival in the Doldrums: The American Women's Rights Movement, 1945 to the 1960s*, Leila Rupp and Verta Taylor note the less noticeable ways in which women of the 1950s and 1960s, like Francis, fought for equality.⁸³ While Francis was never unruly in her behavior, she did violate 1950s standards in observable ways. Instead of chiding this behavior, *Newsweek* deemed her an “original contribution” to television for appearing more multidimensional than other female stars.⁸⁴ Publicly, Francis’ “looks, age, verbal style, and wit transgressed feminine norms.”⁸⁵

⁸³ Leila Rupp and Verta Taylor, *Survival in the Doldrums: The American Women's Rights Movement, 1945 to the 1960s* (London: Oxford University Press, 1987).

⁸⁴ “Arlene Francis: The Quick Queen of Television,” *Newsweek* 19 July 1954: 23-24.

⁸⁵ Cassidy, *What Women Watched*, 146.

In a 1955 edition of *Cosmopolitan*, a friend of Francis' observed, "Arlene is impulsive, but she has breeding and taste. I think she could say anything on the air and get away with it."⁸⁶ Despite *Cornet's* assertion that her razor-sharp wit might cost Francis her career, it is precisely this wit that drew audiences to tune in, and kept her from trouble with the FCC. During a radio episode of *What's My Name?* while impersonating Fannie Hurst and waiting for the contestant to answer correctly, Francis gasped, "Oh my God!" Then said, "Oh my God, I can't say oh my God over the air!"⁸⁷ Despite this grave infraction of radio code, Francis did not receive the customary fine. On a 1961 episode of *What's My Line?*, she pulled the straps of her dress off her shoulders and declared "I'm a girl!" According to Francis, a female viewer wrote into the show stating her disgust over Francis' vulgar behavior. The viewer deemed the action so offensive, that she barred her family from further watching the program.⁸⁸ The week prior, when questioning a mink saleswoman, Arlene asked if guest panelist, Governor William Quinn of Hawaii, would find it pleasurable if she was using said product. To which the governor replied, "I'm sure that almost anything you'd use, I could enjoy." Francis pushed back, "Feel free to carry me through the state of Hawaii anytime, Governor."⁸⁹ When panelist and publisher Bennett Cerf asked a contestant if the product could be found on top of a bed, Arlene quipped "if it's found under the bed, I think we all better go home," leading the audience into uproarious laughter.⁹⁰ Francis described herself as a good girl who sometimes said provocative things.⁹¹ Co-panelist Bennett Cerf noted that

⁸⁶ Jon Whitcomb, "Arlene Francis," *Cosmopolitan* April 1955: 78.

⁸⁷ Whitcomb, "Arlene Francis," 78.

⁸⁸ "January 29, 1961," *What's My Line?*, CBS, 1961.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ "May 24, 1959," *What's My Line?*, CBS, 1961.

⁹¹ Francis, *Arlene Francis*, 54.

Francis' primary goal on air was to get a laugh from the audience. While all of these comments were meant to be taken lightly, they show how, even in trivial circumstance, Francis gained control of audiences and asserted small freedoms for herself.

In more serious moments, Francis used live television to champion women. When R.S. Colley, the developer of the space suits used for Project Mercury, appeared on *What's My Line?* Francis suggested that Colley begin making suits to fit females too.⁹² When frequent guest panelist actor Tony Randall declared that men are the "superior sex," Francis quickly turned to Randall, with an icy glare, and retorted that the male sex is "not the superior sex, it's an equal sex."⁹³ And every time John Charles Daly or Bennett Cerf aggressively flirted with a female contestant, Francis, in a jovial but stern manner, took note of their actions. On an episode of *I've Got a Secret*, Francis confronts panelist Henry Morgan for his assertion that women are not as smart as men.⁹⁴ During a segment on television's *The Arlene Francis Show*, Francis read and responded to questions sent in from viewers. When asked if an unmarried woman could make a good wife and mother despite having sexual experiences with other men, Francis answered "this girl has just as much chance of making a good wife and mother as anyone else has. She cannot spend the rest of her life feeling guilty and remorseful."⁹⁵ Another viewer wrote in her concerns over her husband's complete financial control. Francis declared that husbands should not bar their wives from money, nor should they dole out small allowances for household chores. "I believe in a system of his, hers, and theirs," she said.⁹⁶ A system where husbands and wives are

⁹² "October 25, 1959," *What's My Line?*, CBS, 1959.

⁹³ "December 25, 1960," *What's My Line?*, CBS, 1960.

⁹⁴ "October 19, 1960," *I've Got a Secret*, CBS, 1960.

⁹⁵ "December 13, 1957," *The Arlene Francis Show*, NBC, 1957.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

seen as equal powerholders. These questions and Francis' responses show the ways in which women were searching for their places in the male-dominated society. Women wanted to become a force of action within their own lives and no longer simple spectators.

Articles of the time argued that Arlene Francis was allowed to violate certain norms, because she had "a way with men."⁹⁷ In 1956, caricaturist Al Hirschfeld deemed Francis "Father's Favorite Female." She was often noted for possessing the desirable qualities of both a mistress and wife. Her self-deprecating sense of humor drew men towards her, and *TV Guide* suggested that one could search all over the country without finding an enemy or even one person who felt lukewarm towards Francis. Most importantly, she never barked or complained. She could be tired, beat and exhausted, with people surrounding her asking for something, and Francis would continuously smile, never losing her patience and never becoming unnerved. She was an "older" woman working in expendable industry, there was no space for Francis to complain.

Her appeal to men was not fully an unconscious matter as Francis noted that she learned that men are secretly attracted to women who use their language and wit without embarrassment.⁹⁸ It is likely that Francis used her innate femininity both consciously and unconsciously to access and maintain power, as this was one of the few existing ways for women to manipulate situations to suit themselves. And despite being viewed as unconventionally attractive, Francis had that "certain way." Perhaps her unconventional beauty coupled with her incessant need to please made her appear more accessible and attainable to men. During the 1950s when networks would host business lunches, very often, Francis was one of the only

⁹⁷ "Arlene Francis Has Way With Men," *The Pittsburgh Press* 18 July 1943.

⁹⁸ Jon Whitcomb, "Arlene Francis," *Cosmopolitan* April 1955, 79.

women in the room. Mike Wallace remembered that when Arlene walked into a room, everyman sat up straighter and hope that she would come and sit at their table. When Woody Allen and William Shatner appeared on the *What's My Line?* panel in the mid-60s both noted that they had “lusted” after Francis for years.⁹⁹ Co-panelist Bennett Cerf noted that Francis made great contributions to the institution of “sex” and was the embodiment of a “homewrecker.”¹⁰⁰ 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.”¹⁰¹ 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.”¹⁰² To John Charles Daly she was one of the greatest women “ever born, essentially a blithe spirit, warm, gay, kind generous, thoughtful.”¹⁰³ Most importantly, for those watching at home, she was “the personification of everything that is lovely in a woman.”¹⁰⁴

Throughout her career, Francis effortlessly segued from entertainment to news and information programing. Francis was the first television personalities “to treat women as someone intelligent,” Peter Gabel said. “My mother was the catalyst for experts on the family,

⁹⁹ “July 7, 1963,” *What's My Line?*, CBS, 1963; “March 14, 1965,” *What's My Line?*, CBS, 1965.

¹⁰⁰ “February 21, 1965,” *What's My Line?*, CBS, 1965.

¹⁰¹ Steve Beverly, “Arlene Francis Paved Way for Women in T.V.” *Television Week* 22 October 2007: 19.

¹⁰² Virginia Graham, *There Goes What's Her Name: The Continuing Saga of Virginia Graham* (New York: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1965), 246.

¹⁰³ Efron, “Arlene Francis Dazzles,” 23.

¹⁰⁴ Efron, 24.

marriage, style, and conflict.¹⁰⁵ That's a prime staple of television today, but Arlene Francis helped set the first bar. Despite Francis' appeal and success, she existed within a society that confined women into their roles as wives and mothers. By living 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 risk a more complex view of American feminism. If the society of that period reduced and did so little to reinforce women's strengths, then any small combats must be seen as a stronger statement.

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."¹⁰⁶ 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."¹⁰⁷ Phalen applies the concept of "gender culture" to television broadcasting and argues that the experiences and needs of men determine the processes of television production. She notes that women in media organizations have to adapt to structures that reflect the priorities of men; therefore, a

¹⁰⁵ *Television Week* 22 October, 2007: 19.

¹⁰⁶ "Arlene Francis: TV's Busiest Woman," *Look* 4 May 1956: 56.

¹⁰⁷ Patricia Phalen, "Pioneers, Girlfriends and Wives: An Agenda for Research on Women and the Organizational Culture of Broadcasting," *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* 44, no.2 (2010): 230.

womans value is determined by the success of her home. Francis operated within this gender culture; much of her career relied on her domestic success.

Magazines were one of the best ways to promote the ideology of the “perfect” woman, as all households purchased several magazines per week. The rise of magazine culture was greatly influence by media, Hollywood, consumerism and even the government. Even if the act of reading a magazine was passive, the intentions behind the manufacturing were much larger. Female-centered magazines concurrently encouraged certain behaviors and encouraged women to refuse professional opportunities to stay home. Nearly all of Francis’ publicity from the 50s and 60s glorified her “frantic” schedule and her ability to master both the domestic and nondomestic spheres. *Cosmopolitan* deemed her the “iron woman” for accomplishing what no other woman had done.¹⁰⁸ 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.¹⁰⁹ In 1960, *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.”¹¹⁰ For more than a decade, American psychiatrists, sociologists, women’s magazines and television shows portrayed

¹⁰⁸ Maurice Zolotow, “Arlene Francis,” *Theater Arts Magazine* 4 May 1956: 58.

¹⁰⁹ Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (New York: Basic Book, 1992), 23.

¹¹⁰ Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1963), 68.

the post-WWII housewife as the happiest person on the planet and to the extent that women believed this to accurately describe everyone else, they felt alone and inadequate.¹¹¹

In February of 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.¹¹² 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 continuously pointing out Francis’ “unique” qualities and “unusual” stamina, these pieces suggested that only she could achieve harmony at work and at home, and that most women were not capable of these feats. Francis’ level of success was specific to her and her isolated set of skills. 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.¹¹³ In any spare time, she obsessively prepared for interviews. This excessive need for preparation shows that Francis, whether it was conscious or not, knew that she needed to work substantially harder than her male counterparts. In these ways, Francis’ public image matches the portraits explored by Joanne Meyerowitz in “Beyond the Feminine Mystique,” which observes individual wives and mothers who achieved public recognition through hard work. Meyerowitz argues that nondomestic success usually involved the glorification of “frenetic activity” required to balance home and career.¹¹⁴ There is little space today for women in

¹¹¹ Lynn White, *Educating Our Daughters: A Challenge to the Colleges* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1950), 25.

¹¹² “Career Woman-Housewife of the Year,” *Chic* February 1955, 17.

¹¹³ Zolotow, “Arlene Francis,” 57.

¹¹⁴ Joanne Meyerowitz, “Beyond the Feminine Mystique,” *The Journal of American History* 79, 4 (1993): 1457.

powerful positions to make mistakes, and Francis seemed aware that her success rested on her consistent infallibility. While Francis' intelligence, appearance and verbal acuity appeared to separate her from the restricted world that other females existed in, she too fell victim to the powers of her time.

Because magazines consistently reported on Francis' feminine grace and seemingly genuine charm, female viewers wanted lessons on being Arlene. In response, Francis released *That Certain Something: The Magic of Charm* in 1960. The book, appearing to be written solely by Francis, fully captures the "cult of charm," and the way it helped define femininity and feminine attractiveness in the postwar era. Francis defined what behaviors contributed to a charming aura. She declared that "charm is inextricably connected to good grooming and outward attractiveness," that it is essential to smile often and "speak in a well-modulated, controlled and quiet voice."¹¹⁵ Combined together, these attributes allowed charm to emanate from a person, while seeming wholly true to oneself. It is important to note that these are the exact qualities that were most admired about Francis. In 1961, Francis released another domestically charged publication, *No Time for Cooking*. The cookbook features meals ready to serve in five to fifteen minutes and pages of full color shots of Francis preparing and serving meals in her own home whilst wearing extravagant evening attire. These recipes require an alarming amount of gelatin and range from a "Turkey in Aspic" to a "Bologna Ring Gelatin Mold." Peter Gabel remains doubtful that his mother ever prepared any of these recipes, as she spent most of the early 1960s swept up in her cascade of television shows and filming Billy Wilder's *One, Two, Three*. Whether or not Arlene Francis actually cooked for her family is,

¹¹⁵ Arlene Francis, *That Certain Something: The Magic of Charm* (New York: Messner Publications, 1960) 25-27.

however, irrelevant. What is important is that through articles, stories, advertisement and even through recipes, editors worked to convince housewives of the need to build a harmonious life and “ideal” family, even though this clashed with women’s personal goals. Arlene Francis’ existence as a working woman did not diminish her domestic duties. She was still expected to present the image of the ideal woman- one, who in spite of any personal goals, maintained a healthy, functional and beautifully photographed domestic life.

Ultimately, Arlene Francis’ “true self” never fully aligned with the era of domestic femininity. Articles were quick to note that she failed to meet standard beauty ideals. She was unconventional; “Arlene, By Hollywood standards, is no doll,” but she “has the air of a perpetual debutante.”¹¹⁶ Throughout her entire life, she refused to reveal her age, even having the birth year on her license and passport altered by a decade. She most likely took these steps because she was married at 39 to a man five years her junior and gave birth to her only child at age 40, placing her well outside the decade’s statistical norms. She was nearly 48 years old when *Home* premiered in 1954. Yet, Francis projected the youth and glamour that was customary for “attractive” women. She embodied a paradox: an intelligent, politically aware “matron” and working woman, as well as a loving wife and “young” mother. Even her marriage to Gabel was presented as customarily good. Their relationship became trademarked and commercialized through a diamond heart necklace given to her by Gabel on their first wedding anniversary. Francis frequently noted that the heart represented her enormously happy married life, and her attachment to the piece triggered a diamond heart fad in the mid-1950s. The Leru Jewelry Company launched the “Arlene Francis Collection” in 1957, which made Francis’ signature style

¹¹⁶ Whitcom, “Arlene Francis,” 77-78.

and domestic glamour available to the public for an affordable price.¹¹⁷ Francis never made a public appearance without the heart that represented her great domestic success.

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. Francis’ paradoxes mirror the actions of those observed in *Survival in the Doldrums*; the women who fought hardest for equality believed in traditional women’s spheres and definitions. In one breath they championed themselves as independent, successful women, then continued that cooking and cleaning for their families provided an even greater fulfillment. For a *TV Guide* shoot, she wore a “waist-trainer” over her dress as she cut vegetables for her family’s dinner.¹¹⁸ The article titles ranged from “Arlene’s Pots and Puns” and “What Goes on At Arlene’s House” to “A Portrait of a Happy Woman.” And in nearly every interview, she insisted that her family, career, and life were glorious. But within these interviews, Francis’ quiet struggles appeared as she repeatedly contended that both her child and husband were 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.¹¹⁹ If Gabel’s assessment of his mother is accurate, Francis’ motivations align her with centuries of women

¹¹⁷ Leru Jewelry, “The Arlene Francis Collection,” advertisement, 1957.

¹¹⁸ “How I Manage To Keep My Figure Despite Those Double Dinners,” *TV Guide* 27 October 1956: 27.

¹¹⁹ Peter Gabel, interviewed by author, January 10, 2019.

who consciously conformed out of their own best interest. Gabel admits that despite his deep, personal connection with his mother, her relationship with the public often puzzled him. Though he credits his mother as his biggest influence, even Gabel struggled to understand the duality of Francis.

With all of Arlene Francis' satisfactions and with her great successes, there existed two basic areas of conflict that Arlene Francis was never able to resolve: her role as a wife/mother and her role as a performer. The first stemmed 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 or not 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."¹²⁰ At times, it seems that Francis actually believed this, and moreover, that she thought the ideal women 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

¹²⁰ Zolotow, "Arlene Francis," 58.

giving up her multitudinous television, radio, film and theatrical commitments to become this “ideal woman.”

A second major, unresolved conflict in her life lay in the sphere of acting. Just as she had a strong concept of the ideal woman, so had she one of the ideal performer: the great actress portraying a great classical role. This is what she most admired and yearned to be- or so she said repeatedly. Yet the goal escaped her because she was never willing to submit herself to the concentration and the exclusion of all else from her life except the one goal of mastering the art of acting. Her career itself became a thorn in her flesh and her universal acceptance kept her from pursuing this goal. At least once, she publicly stated her discontent with the emptiness of her career. “I wanted to be a great actress, but other things came along.” She continued “television took over with such strength. I was working in every phase of it and I was caught up.”¹²¹ She wanted to be a serious actress, but she also wanted to be popular, well liked, and on the go.

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.”¹²² In a second interview with Mike Wallace on ABC’s *The Mike Wallace*

¹²¹ Efron, “Arlene Francis Dazzles,” 24.

¹²² Gladys Hall, “Why Do Women Hate to Be Called Housewives?” *TV Radio Mirror* 13 December 1957: 72.

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.¹²³

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." 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."¹²⁴ She found a middle ground, which often was the safest place for a woman in the 1950s.

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.¹²⁵ After graduating from Mount St. Vincent's

¹²³ Arlene Francis, interviewed by Mike Wallace, 1959.

¹²⁴ Arlene Francis, interviewed by Mike Wallace, 1959.

¹²⁵ "Postwar Gender Roles," *History, Art & Archives*.

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.¹²⁶ The majority of television audiences in the 1950s began seeking television shows and personalities that echoed the importance of domesticity, and despite being "nondomestic," Francis worked to align herself with these beliefs.

After spending her life obsessed with being well-liked, Francis faced deep emotional distress and insecurities. 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."¹²⁷ The inability to express her true self 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."¹²⁸ 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 joining *Today* as Hugh Downs' co-host. While

¹²⁶ "Postwar Gender Roles," *History, Art & Archives*.

¹²⁷ Francis, *Arlene Francis*, 75.

¹²⁸ *Ibid*, 26.

Francis stated that she turned down the job out of fear that it would cause “too great an upheaval in my relationships with family and friends,” it is important to note the denotation in power.¹²⁹ Just three years prior, she was the star of her own show with Hugh Downs operating as her announcer, but in order to work in day-time again, she would have to take a backseat to the man whom she helped become a television personality. Ultimately, neither Francis nor Downs hosted Today; 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],” or when he cried that she had “too many works.”¹³⁰ And after nearly 30 years of projecting a blissful marriage in which her husband encouraged her confidence and helped mold her stardom, she revealed that her marriage struggled under the magnitude of her celebrity and her financial power. When the Gabels were first married, Martin was the greater-known personality, but following his backlisting by the House of Un-American Activities Committee, Francis’ star shown brighter. Despite his own successes, the elder Gabel felt he 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.¹³¹ As a child, Peter remembers, “every man that spends more than five minutes with [Francis] wanted to marry her,” leaving his father feeling unseen.¹³²

¹²⁹ Francis, *Arlene Francis*, 160.

¹³⁰ Ibid, 68.

¹³¹ Burt A. Folkart, “Martin Gabel, Movie and Broadway Act,” *Los Angeles Times* 24 May 1986: 23

¹³² Peter Gabel, interviewed by author, January 10, 2019.

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 make 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.¹³³

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. "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."¹³⁴ Peter Gabel believes that towards the end of his mother's life that she finally "began to see how there could be something important in even the challenges of feminism to her culture," even if Francis, herself was never suited for radical opposition.¹³⁵

¹³³ "Burt Convy, David Brinkley, Arlene Francis," *The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson*, directed by Bobby Quinn, NBC, 17 March 1978.

¹³⁴ Francis, *Arlene Francis*, 42-3.

¹³⁵ Peter Gabel, interviewed by author, January 10, 2019.

Despite the many regrets Francis felt, what she achieved in her career, far eclipsed her familiarity with guessing occupations or the voices of mystery guests. Every woman on television 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 interviews the menu of guests on *Today*, they should offer a salute to Arlene Francis, who set the stage for every woman in broadcasting who has since followed her. But because Francis’ pioneering work took place within the confines of domesticity, one in which she upheld the status quo instead of outwardly challenging it, it is often difficult to see her as a transformative figure in women’s history.

CONCLUSION

As historians work to uncover the multitude of women that were left out of written histories, I know they will uncover lives as complicated, frustrating and beautiful as Arlene Francis'. Arlene Francis' life, in the pioneering days of television, offers a corrective about the place of women in society. While her story does not necessarily upend the mythology of the 1950s happy homemaker, she certainly makes our understanding more complicated. Women like Francis showed the power of femininity and how it could be seen as a positive force in the world, and that women's role as mothers and housewives should not necessarily been seen as negative. Despite the fact that Francis negotiated a place for herself within the gendered hierarchy of American culture, she has largely fallen out of the historical narrative. It is because the Arlene Francis that television viewers watched in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s represented a series of contradictions that are difficult and often uncomfortable to unpack. Francis was ambitious and by all accounts achieved four highly successful careers in theater, radio, television, and film. She proved that it was not just younger women who could command a national audience in daytime talk, and that a female host could operate as an intellectual body. However, she did not march or mobilize, and argued that she never had to fight for anything , never had to ask "why can't I do it if he's doing it?"¹³⁶ Perhaps Francis was too caught up in the rigidity of her times and too fearful of making enemies or losing her professional impact. But in her own subtle ways, she helped readjust women's roles in primetime television.

One problem remains 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.

¹³⁶ Efron, "Arlene Francis Dazzles," 24.

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. 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 or not 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. 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.¹³⁷ 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.

¹³⁷ Barbara Ryan, *Feminism and the Women’s Movement: Dynamics of Change in Social Movement Ideology and Activism* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 23.

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 world was not a gender paradise before the 1950s; and for most of human history women have been oppressed and denied fundamental rights. The fifties did not create sexism or rigidly stratified gender roles, but the time did pressure women to an incalculable extent. The increased question of their condition and 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. After all, she heavily participated in magazines and television and radio programs that sought to convince women to adapt and to become this perfect woman. Nevertheless, for Francis, like millions of American women, family life and 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.

Over seventy years have passed since Arlene Francis made her television debut, but for those who knew her, Francis maintains a high level of status and regard. Recently, both Dick Cavett and Carl Reiner confessed that they both spend hours watching *What's My Line?*, because they so love and miss Francis. For Reiner, watching these reruns is like "visiting with Arlene."¹³⁸ Her frequent television partner, Betty White remembers Francis as the woman who "could handle almost anything...you couldn't throw a curve that she could not handle. That type of personality does not come around very often."¹³⁹

¹³⁸ Jackie Sanders, *Arlene Francis: That Certain Something*, directed/written by Jackie Sanders (Not Released), Documentary Feature.

¹³⁹ Sanders, *Arlene Francis: That Certain Something*.

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