At Barnes and Noble in downtown Washington D.C., Julia Child’s cookbook, *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*, is the centerpiece of the throne-sized bookshelf. *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* is Child’s bestselling cookbook (coauthored with Simone Beck and Louise Bertholle), credited for bringing French cuisine to the United States. In addition to this cookbook, Child gained success with the popular PBS television show, *The French Chef*, which garnered more than 50 million viewers (Smilgis). Child’s popularity was in large part due to her relatability, sense of humor, and gifted writing. Her relevance endures as she is the subject of biographies, films, blog posts, and Halloween costumes. Some of Child’s contemporaries, however, did not admire her work in the kitchen where she much of her spent her time cooking elaborate French meals. The kitchen, for a number of feminists, was a prison from which to escape. Betty Friedan specifically critiqued the amount of time women spent in the kitchen, arguing that women sacrifice their freedom by devoting their lives to domestic labor. At a time when women were expanding their role by taking jobs outside the home during World War II, Julia Child seemed to perpetuate gender norms by perfecting the art of cooking in the kitchen.

Unlike many feminists of the 1960s, contemporary writers see Child not as a housewife who encouraged women to stay in the kitchen, but as a feminist role model who sought to liberate women by using cooking as a tool of self-expression. If a “feminist” is one who asserts her personal agency free from the dictations of patriarchy, Julia Child was just that: a feminist who made her own choices and created a career in a male-dominated sphere through cooking. In line with this definition, modern feminists have retroactively inducted Julia Child into their imagined
feminist lineage. They see Child as someone who transformed the domestic sphere from an anti-feminist prison into an art studio by turning housewifely duties from burdens into an expression of joy and art. By recognizing the artistic value in cooking, Child challenged the popular notion of a housewife and asserted that women could find freedom and liberation in cooking. Since her attitude aligned with values of the second-wave feminist movement, Child can be considered as much a feminist as Betty Friedan. Perhaps this is why feminists today see Child as a role model for young women striving for successful careers. In fact, many writers have included Child in feminist publications, such as blogs and magazines like Ms., founded by the renowned leader of the women’s liberation movement, Gloria Steinem (Pogrebin). These bloggers and columnists insist that Julia Child is a leader for today’s women.

While Child’s literary and television success certainly deserves admiration, scholars should not overlook how the hilarious and bumbling Julia Child was complex and even flawed. Child, after all, devoted her life’s work to a cuisine and lifestyle that alienated lower-class women. Catering mostly to the white middle-class housewife, Child’s brand of feminism lacked intersectionality that made her inaccessible to poor and lower-class women. Child was also notoriously homophobic and the subject of a lawsuit that accused her of barring a gay man from becoming the executive director of the American Institute for Wine and Food. If this were true, Child certainly does not seem like the ideal role model for modern-day feminism. Drawing from contemporary feminist theory, this paper questions the retroactive application of the label “feminist” to Julia Child and the ways in which Child both perpetuated and challenged gender norms.

**CONSTRUCTING THE FEMINIST NARRATIVE**
One can gain valuable insight into the many dimensions of Child through her memoir. Here, Child describes her romantic journey to France in 1948, where she fell in love with food and began her cooking career. Child followed her husband, Paul, to France because he was appointed a position for the U.S. State Department. Child was thrilled to leave her conservative family in Pasadena, California, for *la belle France*, where she experienced a moment that would become an iconic part of popular history: her first French meal. For this meal, Child dined on *portugaise* (“oysters on the half shell”) and *pain de seigle* (rye bread), and white wine (Child 17). In her memoir, Child recalls, “I closed my eyes and inhaled the rising perfume...It was a morsel of perfection” (18). This memory played a large role in her memoir as well as the blog-to-book-to-screen adaptation of Julie Powell’s *Julie and Julia*. In the film, Meryl Streep portrays Child’s first French meal as a romantic, sexual experience (*Julie & Julia*). “It was the most exciting meal of my life,” Child recalls as a ninety-year-old woman (*My Life in France* 18). Child attributes her passion for food and cooking to this very moment.

Child had the luxury of dining on French meals because in addition to Paul’s government paycheck, she received a modest inheritance that provided the means to pursue her passions. This afforded Julia the time and money to pursue French cooking—a privilege outside the means of the “servantless American cook” whom *Mastering* intended to serve (Child, et. al. xxiii). Ironically, Child’s economic status enabled her to pursue a dream of cooking in the kitchen, while patriarchy confined less privileged women to also cook in the kitchen. Still, Child rejected convention and possessed no interest in becoming an embassy wife who mainly functioned as decoration at dinners and reception. In fact, she saw these as boring events that muted her colorful personality. Back in the United States, women of Child’s world were taught skills to
become “useful” housewives. Growing into adulthood, “upper-middle-class girls like [Child] learned to apply makeup and took basic cooking and sewing classes while waiting for Mr. Right to drive up in his new Buick” (Barey 30). Knowing that women were capable of more than what society expected of them, Child “bristled at situations that required her--or any woman--to function as window dressing” (Spitz 203). She disliked the idea that women were expected to serve their families rather than pursuing professional goals (Spitz 15-16).

Enamored by all things French--especially the food—Child decided to study French cooking. Having the time and funds in Paris, she enrolled at the renowned cooking school, Le Cordon Bleu. Her first cooking class was with two other women, “neither of whom had done any cooking at all” (My Life in France 62). Child described it as a “‘housewife’ course” in which women learned simple tasks such as boiling eggs. She was disappointed by the course’s rudimentary nature because she wanted to learn how to cook exciting, professional French cuisine (62). After appealing to the maîtresse to transfer into a more advance course, Child joined a class of eleven men who had been army cooks during WWII and sought to open restaurants. At Le Cordon Bleu, cooking was clearly gendered where basic “housewife” cooking courses were offered to women and professional cooking courses were offered to men.

Even though Child was venturing into a man’s world, she was far from intimidated by her classmates. Child explained, “I had spent most of the war in male-dominated environments and wasn’t fazed by them in the least” (My Life in France 59). The male-dominated cooking industry did not stop Child from eventually succeeding in the career of cooking—an activity considered a housewives’ chore if performed by a woman but a professional trade if performed
by a man. Julia Child defied this double-standard by seeing cooking as a career and a mode of liberation from the confines of the home. In 1950, Child graduated from *Le Cordon Bleu* and taught at a small private school with Simone “Simca” Beck and Louisette Bertholle in 1951. With these peers, Child wrote *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*, which led to the launch of her first popular cooking show, *The French Chef*. Afterwards, she wrote more cookbooks and sustained continuous television appearances. Her legacy lives on at the Smithsonian Institution, which declared her a “national treasure” and displays her Cambridge kitchen at the National Museum of American History (“Bon Apetit”). Her success was born from transforming a domestic task into an enjoyable art form and by encouraging other women to do the same.

**Julia Child and Second-Wave Feminism**

Although Child became a household name with the publication of *Mastering* in 1961 and the rise of her television show, Child’s success took place during the second-wave feminist movement when submissive housewives were encouraged to change their lifestyles by pursuing careers outside the home. Feminists in the 1960s encouraged women to take advantage of opportunities to express themselves outside of traditional gender roles. Second-wave feminists celebrated the “liberated” woman as someone who acted independently of male influence and patriarchal expectations (Spitz 15). Although few people acknowledged it at the time, Child subscribed to this feminist ideology by locating a career within cooking.

One of the most popular responses to the domestic drudgery plaguing American women was Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*, published just two years after Child’s *Mastering* (1963 and 1961, respectively). In this text, Friedan plainly states, “The real causes of feminism and of women’s frustration was the emptiness of the housewife’s role” (240). While this dissatisfaction
was exactly what Julia Child aimed to escape, Friedan advised that women minimize their role in
the kitchen and save time with the assistance of technological devices. With the help of
electrical appliances, women could use the extra time saved on housework to pursue a passion.
This second-wave feminist approach home brings a new perspective to recipes in *Mastering the
Art of French Cooking*, which are extremely time-consuming. Between preparation and cooking,
it could cost the cook at least five hours to make a French meal such as *boeuf bourguignon*
(*Mastering* 314). Second-wave feminists suggested that women instead use this time to seek a
career outside the home rather than cooking in the kitchen, which was considered a stifling chore
imposed by patriarchal norms. Friedan had difficulty reconciling cooking and feminism, joking
to her readers that “I am considering making soup from scratch next summer….No, I am not
announcing public defection from the women’s movement” (qtd. in Ray 53). In assuring readers
of her continued devotion to feminism while preparing soup, Friedan suggests that women need
to justify cooking. Since cooking in the home was directly associated with domesticity and anti-
feminist activity, Friedan would probably think that the amount of time required to accomplish a
difficult dish from *Mastering* ought to be devoted to something more “liberating.”

**Julia Child and Third-Wave Feminism**

Child was no doubt aware that her passion for cooking perpetuated conventional notions about a
woman’s role in the home. According to Ray Krishnendu, she “was surrounded by the spectacle
of domesticity, and she appropriated it” (Ray 52). Child, indeed, used the concept of domesticity
to her advantage in order to gain credibility among her audience. This is evident by the set of her
cooking show, *The French Chef*, which was filmed in a kitchen where Child wore “a boxy cotton
blouse with homemade badge (Spits 343)” that resembled the uniform of home economics
teachers. This badge portrayed Child as the viewer’s teacher, trustworthy in all things domestic.
In wearing such accessories, Child was a poster child for American domesticity.

Despite Child’s seemingly traditional role in the kitchen, her agency and success actually align with second-wave feminist values. According to Child, cooking in the kitchen had the potential to liberate women rather than imprison them as Friedan preached. Though Child would never have said it, both her personal and professional accomplishments in cooking were feminist choices. After all, she exercised her right to pursue happiness, a goal that second-wave feminists encouraged. Child not only pursued a professional career in union with feminist values, but she proved that a woman did not need to leave the kitchen to do so. Child, in turn, changed other women’s attitudes about food and cooking. Political scientist Kennan Ferguson argues,

> Child's attitude toward food itself seemed liberatory to a generation of women who largely presumed that cooking was about feeding one's family and impressing one's guests...Cooking, as feminist historians have shown, has long been a form of underappreciated domestic labor. For Child, however, cooking could be re-presented as an activity for the self, aimed at individual pleasure. (Ferguson)

Firmly believing that cooking was both a science and an art, Child presented cooking as a personally satisfying activity in which women could find happiness and fulfillment.

Forty years later, Child appears in feminist blogs and magazines that portray her as a role model for strong women. Celebrating what would have been Child’s 100th birthday on August 15, 2012, Bitch magazine published a short tribute to the chef:

> Even if she chose not to identify as a feminist, she stood up for feminist causes, collaborated with other women, broke new ground for female chefs, poopooed dieting, had a very egalitarian relationship with her husband, and was 6'2" and childless—a rebellion in its own right (Wallace).

This author retroactively applies the label of feminist to Child even though the chef did not accept this title herself. An article in Ms. Magazine similarly highlights the feminist undertones...
of Child’s career, praising the fact that Child was pro-choice, a Democrat, and held strong convictions (Smilgis). Biographer Bob Spitz also noted Child’s particular interest in women’s rights, adding that she dedicated her time to Planned Parenthood because “she believed in a woman’s autonomy, in a woman’s having control of her own decisions” (Spitz 438). The subject of women’s bodily autonomy continues to be hotly debated, which is perhaps why Spitz emphasized Child’s perspective on this topic.

Child’s fight for equal opportunity in employment, and endorsement of a woman’s right to work in a predominantly male sphere, also reveals a feminist attitude. Known for bursting into restaurant kitchens and demanding to know how many women cooks worked the stove, Child was committed to gender equality in the kitchen—a deeply feminist commitment. During these moments, Child made it very clear to restaurateurs that they ought to hire more women. Spitz explains that Child “loved the whole suffragette aspect” of seeing women advance in the culinary world (219). She loved “any time that women stood up for themselves and stuck it to the men” (219). From her classroom experience with a dozen GIs to her insistence that women belong in the professional culinary world, Child was nothing short of an advocate for second-wave feminism and women’s rights.

Child’s mastery of cooking, however, continues to inspire the question, “Is cooking anti-feminist?” Megan Kearns, feminist blogger and communications director for Bitch Flicks, composed a blog post that deconstructed the idea of cooking as an anti-feminist activity. She notes that, “growing up, my mother hated cooking, a result of being forced to make meals...my mother treated cooking as a laborious chore” (Kearns). However, she explains “I found
liberation in cooking. Cooking is an art form; it allows me a creative outlet to express myself...but I’m a feminist too...how can this be?” (Kearns) Modern women thus have a choice; they can cook for the fun of it, to create, and to enjoy their food, or, they can opt for time-saving, less labor-intensive cooking strategies that treat cooking as purely functional. With either choice, women can remain feminists. “Feminism and cooking are not at odds,” Kearns concludes in her blog. In this sense, Child can be understood as a feminist innovator who gave women a paintbrush and canvas with cooking.

Because Child exercised choice in the matter, many feminist writers see Child as a feminist role model. They commend Child for being a strong, professional, and financially successful role model for women. This is apparent in Powell’s film of Julia Child, which shows the chef in the throes of publishing her first cookbook. This film heroicizes Child as a feminist seeking equality in a male dominated world of cooking. In the end, critics and filmmakers thrust a feminist label on Child when, in her time, she was not considered a feminist. Modern feminists continue to use Child, and her second-wave feminist values, as a role model for the third-wave feminist movement.

**JULIA CHILD AND INTERSECTIONALITY**

Scholarship on third-wave feminism and intersectionality offer a different look at Child and reveal how the chef may not be a hero for equality among women and men. For how can Child be the perfect feminist role model when her views towards sexuality carried an air of exclusivity? After all, Child was “rabidly homophobic,” according to the *LA Times* (“Julia Child ‘Rabidly’”). She referred to gays as “fairies,” “homos,” or “fags” and was known to make “vague innuendos” about her friends’ sexualities (Spitz 445). Those who knew her suggest that
Child was not very politically correct in general (445). Although Child had close friends and colleagues who were gay, she refused to acknowledge their sexuality, even as they were dying from AIDS (458). Her opinion about homosexuality was further exposed when she allegedly barred Daniel Clouter from a position at the American Institute for Food and Wine “because the famed chef did not want a homosexual in charge” (“Julia Child ‘Rabidly’”). To Child’s credit, she apparently “changed her tune” and grew more accepting as she aged (Stein). Nonetheless, Child’s prejudice excluded a portion of her audience, which falls out of line with third-wave feminist perspectives founded on values of inclusivity.

Child also made for a problematic role model because her work was inaccessible to women of lower incomes. French cooking à la Child was expensive and only affordable to women of middle- or upper-class lifestyles. At the time, French cooking was closely associated with people of high status, including the Kennedys who were well known for staffing the White House kitchens with French cooks. Child was aware that people were reading about what the Kennedys were eating,” admitting that “I happened to come along at the right time” (qtd. in Spitz 32). Child’s intention was to share French cuisine with middle-class women, to whom she addressed in her introduction for Mastering:

This is a book for the servantless American cook who can be unconcerned on occasion with budgets, waistlines, time schedules, children’s meals, the parent-chauffeur-den-mother syndrome, or anything else which might interfere with the enjoyment of producing something wonderful to eat. (xxiii)

Though intending to appeal to the “servantless American cook,” Child’s actual reader needed the funds and the time to cook the elaborate recipes in her book. They also needed the money to splurge on expensive utensils. It turns out then that Child could only liberate the already privileged middle-class woman.
Food writer Michael Pollan asserts that "fancy food has always served as a form of cultural capital" (Pollan). In essence, food production and consumption are signifiers of social status. The elaborate dishes in *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* are evidence of this as they require ample start-up capital. Although Child promised her readers that all ingredients could be supplied “from the American Supermarket” (Child xxiii), this was not true. The classic *boeuf bourguignon* would cost the modern chef at least $30 to produce, granted she already owned the necessary cooking tools. When editor Judith Jones requested that Child and Beck include “more hearty peasant dishes’...that were less time-consuming and expensive to prepare at home,” Child flat-out refused, dismissing the needs of lower-class women (Spitz 304). She claimed that the French middle- and lower-classes “‘cook like everybody else’...with tradition and refinement” (304). Child’s cookbook, as a result, was only relevant to a very narrow group of women.

**CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, Child should not be considered an icon of modern feminism since she does not promote equality among women. Her rejection of queer equality and disregard for women of the lower classes does not align with third-wave feminist values, which, as an intersectional movement, aims to equalize queer women with their heterosexual counterparts. Third-wave feminists should instead consider icons who believe in a widely intersectional movement—one that includes queer people, poor women, and women of color. Writer bell hooks discusses the lack of diversity in feminism, stating that the women’s liberation movement “aims to make women the social equals of men...Since men are not equals in white supremacist, capitalist, patriarchal class structure, which men do women want to be equal to?” (19). hooks goes on to
argue that the women’s movement only equalizes gender between men and women of straight, white, and class privilege. Feminist Barbara Smith also argues for a more diverse definition of feminism, stating:

Feminism is the political theory and practice to free all women: women of color, working-class women, poor women, physically challenged women, lesbians, old women, as well as white economically privileged heterosexual women. Anything less than this is not feminism, but merely female self-aggrandizement. (qtd. in Moraga 61)

Consequently, as the third-wave feminism progresses, it must be an inclusive movement to be classified as true feminism. Child, therefore, is not the greatest role model to a third-wave feminist since she excluded poor and queer women from succeeding as cooks and leaders in the culinary arts.

Julia Child, instead, should be praised for bringing tremendous progress to housewives with privilege. Indeed, she likely freed many women from boredom in the kitchen if they so chose to use cooking as an outlet to express their creativity. Child was also revolutionary for transforming a traditionally domestic task into a means of artistic expression, successfully establishing herself as a rightful member of the culinary world. Her self-liberation from the traditional, mundane existence of a housewife reveals how Child upheld a number of ideals from the second-wave feminist movement. Her pursuit of cooking in a male-dominated profession makes her especially worthy of the title of second-wave feminist. Julia Child, in this sense, was a feminist but only in the context of dominant 1960s feminism. Child thus deserves an important place in American feminist history. Because while Charlotte Bronte wrote, while Clara Barton nursed, and while Gloria Steinem led the women’s liberation movement, Julia Child cooked.
**WORKS CITED**


