My project for WGST 313H titled “Consumerism in the Cult of Domesticity: An analysis of The House Beautiful Publication Following the First World War” examines monthly volumes of The House Beautiful from the years 1919, 1920, and 1921. In my examination of this material, I look to articles and written content to better understand and chronicle the moral and ideological prescriptions of family, gender, class, and race embedded in the magazine’s philosophy of taste and lifestyle following the end of World War I. My work attempts to analyze how consumer culture is associated with and advertised to middle-class white women by conducting an in-depth content review on the following three themes: American Design and Taste, Parenting and Family Growth, and Household Operations. Lastly, I attempt to delineate the ways in which white middle-class women and their intersection with race, class, and gender is practiced, sculpted, and produced by The House Beautiful as well as how it influences concepts of consumption of and access to design.

Around one-fourth of the semester was devoted to sourcing and accumulating information. The original intention of this project was to analyze a wider range of The House Beautiful’s articles in hopes of comparing the philosophical messaging and sociological commentary of the post-World War I and post-World War II eras. Due to the restrictions of COVID-19 and inability to access archival locations or gain access to much needed material for the original intellectual pursuit of the project, I was tasked with sculpting a new project out of already existing or accessible material and sources. Unable to access the would-be physical and in-person copies of the publication beyond the year of 1924, this study pulls exclusively from online scans and versions of the original magazine provided by the University of Michigan, University of Minnesota, and Harvard University libraries through the Wellesley College partnership with the Hathi Trust Database to investigate the post-World War I subject matter. Focused on the years of 1919, 1920, and 1921, I conducted a deep content analysis of the commentary material provided within the pages of the magazine. Ignoring advertisements and images, I thematically indexed, using both descriptive and analytical categorizations, the staff produced writing pieces of each month beginning in January 1919 until December 1921 of The House Beautiful. First, I scanned all the articles for relevant information including subject matter associated with the following descriptive categorizations: Gender, Race, Class, Family, Societal Norms, Historically Reflective Commentary, and the Physical, Social, and Economic Make-Up of the Home. Articles siloed from the first round entered a secondary round of coding using
manageable analytical code categories for deeper analysis. I established eight subcategories from the second content analysis: Time-Period Specific Commentary; Innovation, Transformation, or Automation of the Household; Parenting Style/s; Household Roles and Gendered Spheres; American Taste; Ideals of the Family; Accessibility to Design; and Importing Design. The process of coding allowed for a strategic and organized evaluation of the editorial philosophy. This paper particularly focuses on the following three themes for which I believe constitute the magazine’s ideologies of the domestic interior and gendered home within the larger societal ecosystem of the U.S. following the end of the First World War: American Design and Taste, Parenting and Family Growth, and Household Operations.

The first part, American Design and Taste, is the manner for which The House Beautiful distinguishes the single-family home as a distinctly American space through linkages to commercial capitalism and national identity. I show the manner in which the magazine’s articles shift interior beautification to a consumer-driven pastime and the home as an important expression of identity that reaffirms class power, the nation, and gender. The second part, Parenting: A Room of One’s Own, highlights the manner for which the magazine’s content uses already existing gendered labor dynamics of the middle-class home to encourage mass consumption and the gendering of children. Integrating social science and the psychology of childhood into its commentaries allows The House Beautiful to market to a privileged set of readers and facilitate a white middle-class female retreat to the domestic interior. In the final segment of the paper, Household Operations details the manner in which the middle-class white woman is encouraged to maximize comfort, minimize time, and keep up with evolving economic and household conditions by overtly consuming goods, services, and household plans by the content in The House Beautiful. The entirety of the project relied on the important data provided by The House Beautiful as well as supplementary sources that bolstered and gave context to the surrounding themes, histories, and structures discussed in this paper.

This independent project taught me so much about archival research and content analysis within the Women’s and Gender Studies discipline and beyond. The impact of the pandemic in addition to having never conducted archival research prior to this project, taught me the importance of flexibility and to value every source of information both big and small. This type of research provided me a closeness to the data and opportunity to examine the communication of ideas through historical texts. The pandemic allowed me to dig into a smaller collection of articles and content to produce what I believe to be a richer paper than one produced by extensive volumes of The House Beautiful. Furthermore, the COVID-19 context allowed me to develop and build more robust and resourceful research techniques. So, although COVID-19 greeted impacted the research process, it created many challenges that shaped this independent study into a final product for which I am very proud. Lastly, I would like to thank Wellesley College, the Women’s and Gender Studies Department, Professor Hertz, and all the library staff members for their assistance in helping me secure these archival sources, supporting me throughout the independent research process, and providing me with the platform to develop as a scholar.