Throughout the second half of this course we have explored the idea of identity and its many meanings. By definition, identity is the fact of being whom or what a person is. Intersectionality, which is known as the interconnected nature of social categorizations such as race, class, and gender as they apply to a given individual or group, showed many times throughout this course that a person’s identity can be picked apart and made up of many different factors such as sex, gender, race, class, sexuality, etc. One reading in particular that focused on this was Dorothy Allison’s novel, Two or Three Things I Know For Sure, a memoir of stories written about Allison’s family history. Throughout Allison’s book, many examples of dynamic intersectionality can be found.

One specific passage from the novel where this dynamic intersectionality is put into play can be found on pages 32-37 where Allison tells of the women in her family. “Let me tell you about what I have never been allowed to be. Beautiful and female. Sexed and sexual. I was born trash.” (Allison 32). This is Allison describing herself and the way she was raised to believe she was supposed to be-or not be. Being in the lower class and being a female, Allison was taught and it was implied by others that she could not be beautiful, she was undesirable and could not be seen as sexual in any way, “We were not beautiful. We were hard and ugly and trying to be proud of it. The poor are
plain, virtuous if humble and hardworking, but mostly ugly. Almost always ugly.” (Allison 37). Intersectionality can explain this because beauty and being feminine, for women, is often described as having things such as good hair, nice clothes, wearing make up and having money. Being poor prevents people from having all of these things and so they are seen as ugly, or suppose to be ugly, as a result because being ugly is seen as lesser.

A different dynamic is explored in this same passage when Allison demonstrates the idea of white male masculinity and it’s power over women, especially when they are seen as not being beautiful or feminine. Women in this novel are shown to be measured to men in many aspects, but treated the worst when it came to their looks, or the lack there of, “The women of my family were measured, manlike, sexless, bearers of babies, burdens, and contempt.... Solid, stolid, wide-hipped baby machines. We were all wide-hipped and predestined.” (Allison 32). This is important because it’s the way the women are seen by the men: manlike, baby makers, burdens. Nothing more to them than someone to help them reproduce and that is all. She then goes on to say “Men and boys, they all the same. Talk about us like we dogs, bitches sprung full –grown on the world...Turn us into jokes ’cause we get worn down and ugly.” (Allison 36).

Intersectionality can be explained through this because these are straight, white, masculine male roles and they are seen as superior to these women on the grounds that they are female but that they are also not seen as feminine or beautiful. Being male, masculine, white and heterosexual “puts them above” females. We see this explained by Michael Kimmel, in his piece, *Men, Masculinity, and the Rape Culture*, when he states, “What is it about groups that seem to bring out the worst in men? I think it is
because the animating condition for most American men is a deeply rooted fear of other men—a fear that other men will see us as weak, feminine, not manly.” This fear instills the idea of male dominance from an early age making them think that because they are straight men, they are always in competition with one another and need to prove their masculinity. “The fear of humiliation, in losing in the competitive ranking among men, of being dominated by other men—these are the fears that keep men in line and that reinforce traditional notions of masculinity as a false sense of safety.” (Kimmel 145-146).

Another scene from Allison’s novel that can be explored when looking at dynamic intersectionality is when she describes to her sister, one of her past girlfriends and their relationship. The way that Allison describes the woman in which she shared a relationship is not typical of what someone would expect from a female in a relationship. She describes this woman as very masculine and butch-like but also very insecure and shy, “Big, blond, shy and butch, just out of the army, drove a two-door Chevy with a reinforced trunk and wouldn’t say why.” (Allison 72). Because this woman is a white female and of the lower class, the typical standard for her would be similar to what Allison's family faces; a heterosexual, baby machine that sleeps with men, “My daddy loves me, he just don’t understand me.” (Allison 73). It is also not expected that for a female to be masculine, which she is described as by Allison when talking about how she had just gotten out of the army and drove a two-door Chevy, two very masculine things. Women are suppose to be beautiful and girly, things that Allison’s girlfriend were not because of her masculinity in her homosexuality.
Family, in today’s society, is an abstract word. Many people’s thoughts about family include people such as parents, blood relatives and siblings but the way people define their family has been ever changing. It is a word that can be interpreted however desired due to the way gender, sexuality, race and class norms have shaped and revolutionized many ideals about family life throughout history. This definition of family and family life is constantly evolving along with the norms of society, while many aspects have managed to stay unchanged and hold true to family life of present day. Three readings that were looked at that explored family life at different times helped to compare and contrast the way that it has changed but also stayed the same in some ways. These articles were A Little Commonwealth, written by John Demos about family life in the 1600’s, American Manhood, written by E. Anthony Rotundo about family in the 1800’s and The Way We Never Were, written by Stephanie Cootnz about family life in the 1950’s.

In his piece, A Little Commonwealth, John Demos explores family life and what it was like back in the 1600’s during early colonial life in Plymouth colony. During this time family was restricted to the household and was made up of the father, “within the family the husband was always regarded as the head,”(Demos 82) the mother, and “an average of three children per family for an entire community at any given point in time” but that it was not unusual to find “a much higher average of children born to a
particular couple during the whole span of their married lives...that eight to nine children apiece was pretty standard.” (Demos 68). This is similar to family life today in the sense that it’s normal for families to have around three children with two parents running the house and in a lot of cases the father being the head. Gender norms have helped changed this by making it acceptable for mothers and females to become the head of the household along with also being single parents. It also differs from today’s family life because women nowadays do not have “batches” of kids, women of Plymouth would space out their childbirths, “there were certain very firm regularities in the spacing of births in the families of the colonists” (Demos 68) but today we have children during a certain time span in our lives and then usually stop, “(The age at which the average American mother now has her last child is twenty-six)” (Demos 69). Marriage during this time showed a lot of male dominance over females “male dominance was an accepted principle all over the Western World in the seventeenth century” (Demos 82) but also offered three basic obligations for husband and wife. These obligations include regular and exclusive cohabitation, relatively peace and harmonious relationships, and moral and exclusive sexual unions. This is different from marriage today because there is no longer an unspoken expectation for male dominance in a marriage and marriage is not something that is expected like it used to be. It was seen as strange for someone to not get married or even remarried right away if their spouse had died, “It was rather a matter of custom, and indeed of sheer functional necessity.”(Demos 67). It is no longer this way due to a reshaping of gender and class norms. Women do not need to marry or remarry if they choose not to because
they have the freedom to be independent on their own, with their own possessions and being married no longer gives you a higher class status like it used to. Someone can be just as successful and have just as much “land” and possessions if they are single compare to if they had a spouse and children. Marriage at this time was similar to marriage now because though the basic obligations that couples faced back then cannot be demanded now, they are still “rules” that a marriage or relationship should follow and be based off of if hoping to be successful.

In the 1800’s, marriage and family life changed drastically. E. Anthony Rotundo wrote about the way that marriage transformed from a something like a business contract, into something you did with the person you love, “The shift from civil ceremonies to church weddings made a statement: marriage was a hallowed union, not merely a business contract.” (Rotundo 131) in his piece American Manhood. The 1800’s marked a time when “marriage created a household, which was the basic unit of society.” (Rotundo 129). Differing from the 1600’s because people started to marry for love and union, not just because it was what was expected of them, making marriage of this time more similar to marriage of today. This time created what were called “separate spheres” for husband and wife and really put into play gender roles of women staying at home and men bringing home the bacon, “The belief that women were clean and domestic suited them by nature to maintain a home, and the assumption that they were pious and pure fitted them to raise the children and act as a conscious to their husbands...Since men were considered naturally active and courageous, it followed readily that they should go out into the world to play the role of breadwinner.”(Rotundo
This has changed throughout the course of time through the advancement of gender roles making it okay for women to be the breadwinner and men to stay home.

The 1950’s were the era that the idea of a “perfect family” was created. Stephanie Coontz explores this in her piece titled, *The Way We Never Were*. The 1950’s was a time to be romanticized about, or so people like to remember it that way, “Rates of divorce and illegitimacy were half what they are today; marriage was almost universally praised; the family was everywhere hailed as the most basic institution in society.” (Coontz 24). This idea was actually something of poison at the time to maintain for the women of the 1950’s, “The hybrid idea that women can be fully absorbed with her youngsters while simultaneously maintain passionate sexual excitement with her husband was a 1950’s invention that drove thousands of women to therapists, tranquilizers, or alcohol when they actually tried to live up to it.” (Coontz 9). This has changed a lot with family life today because it is not solely the woman’s responsibility to keep the family happy when gender roles began to change and this romantic idea of a perfect family no longer exists. This was also a time of change for family life because it was the first time that men and women both were encouraged to invest themselves into family life and interests, not like previous years when it was the woman’s duty to stay at home with the family and the man invest his time elsewhere, “For the first time, men as well as women were encouraged to root their identity and self-image in familial and parental roles.” (Coontz 27). This is very similar to a lot of family life that happens today as a result the reshaping of gender and class roles over time, it’s now encouraged for
families to participate in things together and there has been research done to prove that a father’s role is just as important in the life of the children as the mother’s. Family life has advanced in many ways due to the discovery and reshaping of gender and sexuality norms, but has also stayed the unchanged in some aspects like areas of marriage. Marriage today is about the unity of two people who love one another, who are equals and put a sufficient amount of effort into the relationship. There is no male dominance or required gender roles when agreeing to the marriage, no ownership over the other person. Family is not confined to the household unit and parental roles are not restricted to mother and father and always having one of each, or both. Family does not have a concrete definition, it is always changing and evolving and will continue to change but always find a way to stay slightly unchanged the more that gender and sexual norms keep being reshaped.