Katie O’Connor

End of Summer Report

This summer, I was fortunate to be able to spend eight weeks on my FURSCA project, *Raising a Feminist: The Connection Between the Riveters of WWII and the Second Wave Feminist Movement*. My intention with this project was to examine the connection between women who worked during World War II, often known colloquially as “Riveters”, and their daughters, who mainly came of age during the second-wave feminist period of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Research and historical context on the Riveters has noted that many of them experienced newfound freedoms during the war years with the sudden access to much higher wages in factory work as opposed to traditional women’s work, and many women who had never worked were drawn into the war effort. In this study, I wanted to examine the consequences of those huge changes – whether they might have altered the Riveters perceptions of women’s place in society, of motherhood, or of feminism, and whether those ideas may have been passed to their daughters. I first conducted a literary review focused on the experiences of women during and shortly after the World War II time period, then began interviewing both Riveters and their daughters on their work, education, and parenting background and experiences and their perspectives of women’s movements and feminism.

My initial goal was to interview approximately 15 women this summer, but the COVID outbreak has made finding participants more difficult than anticipated. As of the end of the FURSCA Summer term, I have interviewed six women (two Riveters and four daughters) and anticipate interviewing at least three more in the coming weeks. The interviews I have conducted so far have been fascinating to say the least, and though I hesitate to draw any conclusions from such a limited sample, one trend I am seeing so far is the reluctance of the daughters to identify themselves as feminists. This reluctance appears even in women that express beliefs that I would personally classify as feminist or support organizations that could be considered feminist in nature – memorably, one daughter I interviewed stated that she supports Planned Parenthood both monetarily and with her time, and even plans to include the organization in her will, yet declined to identify herself as a feminist.

The literature review I conducted also provided many insights. I read four books (and am working on a fifth) and a working paper and watched five films and videos to get a better sense of the experiences of working women during World War II, as well as look into the existing research about mothering in this era. My biggest takeaways from the literature review were the motivations women felt for participating in war work (usually economic but sometimes patriotic), the increased independence that came with personal economic stability and freedom, and the stark differences between white women and women of color’s working experiences before, during, and after the war. As I continue work on this project in the fall, I plan to continue my literature review and search for more diverse participants for my interviews, which will help to capture this difference in experience between women of different races.

I believe this project has been and will be integral to my growth as a scholar and as a student at Albion. This was my first opportunity to develop a research topic and see it through myself, and my faculty mentor gave me a lot of freedom to do so, as well as support whenever necessary. My creativity, work ethic, and drive to see my work finished have all grown, especially in the face of the unique challenges faced this summer in the midst of the pandemic. Once I have finished all the interviews I hope to do this fall, I plan to write my findings into a research paper, which I may eventually develop into my Honors thesis. I also look forward to presenting on this work at Elkin Isaac Research Symposium in the spring. I cannot thank the Lawsons and the entire FURSCA committee enough for providing me with the opportunity to pursue this research, and I look forward to seeing how I will further grow and develop from this experience.