White Noise: Performing the White, Middle-Class Family on 1930s Radio

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Abstract: This study investigates the radio roots of a discourse of domestic whiteness that is typically associated with family sitcoms of the 1950s. Through analysis of a highly popular evening serial, One Man's Family (NBC, 1932–1959), the article tracks the production of domestic whiteness in sound, narrative, and vocal performance, situating it within the institutional and social contexts of 1930s radio.

Although the conventions of white, middle-class domestic comedies are typically associated with television programs like Father Knows Best (CBS, 1954–1960), The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet (ABC, 1952–1966), and Leave It to Beaver (CBS, 1958–1959; ABC, 1958–1963), these program conventions were actually rooted in the institutional, political, and cultural contexts of 1930s radio. Faced with increasing sponsor control over program production and growing government watchfulness from the early 1930s on, networks struggled to contain and control the perceived excesses of live radio productions, especially those using ethnic, racial, and sexually suggestive material. As Michele Hilmes argues, the networks specifically encouraged the production of “non-ethnic ‘white,’ middle-class” shows like Vic and Sade (NBC, 1932–1946), The Aldrich Family (NBC, 1939–1953), and One Man's Family (NBC, 1932–1959) during the late 1930s and into the 1940s as one means of curbing radio's transgressive potential. Although representations of gender, sexual, racial, and class difference made up a significant part of Golden Age radio, the popularity of white domestic comedies began during this period and expanded over the course of the 1940s and 1950s.

1 Michele Hilmes, Radio Voices (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 107, 128–129.

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Beyond Hilmes’s observation, however, little scholarly attention has been paid to radio representations of whiteness. The goal of this study is to interpret how white, middle-class family life was performed using the representational resources of network radio. Through an analysis of one popular prime-time serial, One Man’s Family, I show how whiteness—defined as the cultural performance of white racial subjectivity—was created through an interweaving of narrative and sound strategies. Written and directed by Carlton E. Morse for nearly twenty-seven years, One Man’s Family focused on the domestic world of a successful stockbroker, Henry Barbour, and his wife, Fanny. Henry and Fanny raised five children: Paul, Hazel, Clifford, Claudia, and Jack, who ranged in age from thirty-one to thirteen at the start of the series (Figure 1). While humorous domestic situations and family foibles provided a constant source of light comedy, the program was primarily a melodrama that dealt with intimate family matters (such as divorce and mental illness) that were rarely addressed in other prime-time programs.

One Man’s Family reveals how whiteness became a key component of the performance of middle-class family life, specifically through the construction of suburban domestic space and the performance of gender relations. In a nutshell, sound and narrative worked in One Man’s Family to isolate white, middle-class domestic space, contrasting it to a chaotic and racially threatening world outside. In the domestic sphere, characters both asserted and challenged middle-class male authority in racial terms, and white masculinity was presented as under siege in the face of racialized female power. Ultimately, One Man’s Family offered performances of whiteness that were socially precarious and even debilitating, yet presented as dominant and desirable.

Radio sound—particularly radio voice—was key to the performance of white masculinity in One Man’s Family. In fact, radio voices often exceeded the meaning of the

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4 This definition is adapted from Eric Lott’s observation that, in studying blackface minstrelsy, “our subject properly becomes historical forms of white racial subjectivity as they were worked out in various arenas of cultural contact.” Lott, Love and Theft (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 38.

programs and carried traces of the lived contexts in which the programs were produced. Roland Barthes’s concept of “the grain of the voice” is helpful in describing this excess. He characterizes the grain as “the body in the voice as it sings”—that is, the listener’s sense of the body of the performer in the sound of his or her voice. I argue that the voices of One Man’s Family’s two eldest sons, Paul and Clifford Barbour, resonated with the contexts of the adventure-detective shows in which the actors who played the characters regularly worked. The adventure-detective “grain” of their voices interacted with the narrative contexts of One Man’s Family to perform white masculinity as ghostly and unstable.

I also examine changes in the radio industry that promoted middle-class whiteness as a central characteristic of US broadcast programming. The rise of national networks and the sponsor system prompted a shift away from the ethnic and working-class urban traditions that shaped early radio comedy and drama. As writers and performers steeped in middle-class literary and theatrical traditions entered broadcasting, the site of network production literally shifted from New York and Chicago to Hollywood. One Man’s Family exemplifies this trend and reveals the role that networks played in nationalizing a discourse of whiteness during the 1930s and 1940s.

Finally, this article investigates the broader social field in which network radio performances of the white, middle-class family emerged. As George Lipsitz argues, the 1930s was a critical time for the renegotiation and institutionalization of white privilege in America. New Deal social policies extended benefits disproportionately to white families while excluding and disadvantaging those families deemed “non-white.” These policies not only promoted and protected the “possessive investment in whiteness” but also inscribed that investment onto an idealized family structure that included male economic control, traditional gender roles, and female dependence. As a result, “the American family” became a primary site for the social reproduction of white power in the cultural imaginary, economic practices, and social policies of the 1930s. This imaginary American family took on substance through the weekly performance of domestic whiteness distributed to millions by network programs like One Man’s Family.

**Method.** This study combines an analysis of One Man’s Family recordings and scripts to track the conventions of sound and narrative used to represent the Barbour family and its members. I use program recordings to evaluate sound effects and vocal performances, and I use scripts to track dominant narrative themes and references to race, class, and gender in family relations. The analysis focuses on the years 1936 to 1941, when Morse directed the original cast and achieved the program’s highest prime-time ratings. I focus on this period not only because it represents the peak of One Man’s Family’s popularity and cultural currency but also because it coincides with

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the expansion of West Coast radio production and the institutionalization of family policies during the late New Deal.8

While I have only found one recording from this period, “The Last of 1941,” broadcast on December 28, I have listened to additional recordings from later in the 1940s and gained a familiarity with the original cast’s distinctive voices and performance styles. Knowing the vocal styles of the actors allows one to “hear” the characters in the scripts as one reads them. My selective sample of scripts included all episodes from the months of November, December, and January for each broadcast season from 1936 to 1941, for a total of sixty-four half-hour scripts.9 Along with the text of the scripts, I use examples from “The Last of 1941” recording to illustrate the narrative trends and family interactions that emerge from the script sample. Finally, I interpret the discourse of the recordings and scripts against a backdrop of historical materials related to the program, including promotional materials, program ratings, network documents, and press coverage.

Although a study of a single program is inherently limited, One Man’s Family warrants close attention for a number of reasons. First, it was a highly influential program that spanned the history of network radio and even made the transition to television. One scholar goes so far as to declare that it may have been “the most popular program ever broadcast in America, for the longest period of years.”10 One Man’s Family was recognized by critics for the quality of its writing and production, and by civic groups for its promotion of positive family values.11

The program was also a model of commercial radio success in terms of its production quality, popularity, and attractiveness to sponsors. According to minutes from a 1941 program meeting at NBC, the Vick Chemical Co. expressed interest in sponsoring a “successful family script such as The Aldrich Family and One Man’s Family,” and one imitative program title suggested was “The Barton Family.”12 Indeed, One Man’s Family inspired and paved the way for other family serials, including Pepper Young’s

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8 Following the spate of legislation that accompanied the Social Security Act of 1935, New Deal agencies like the Social Security Administration played a growing role in promoting a traditional model of family life. See Alan Brinkley, Liberalism and Its Discontents (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 23–24, 57.

9 I chose these months so as to have a consistent basis for comparison across the years and to include episodes that focused on family holidays and traditions. One Man’s Family scripts were accessed on microfilm from the NBC Collection at the Wisconsin Historical Society. The recording available from this period is Carlton E. Morse, One Man’s Family, book 40, chapter 13, December 28, 1941, “The Last of 1941,” recording.

10 Walter P. Sheppard, “Some Notes on ‘One Man’s Family,’” Journal of Broadcasting 14, no. 2 (1970): 183. One Man’s Family was neither the longest-running nor the most popular radio show. Of the long-running shows, however, it was one of the few that ran in prime time, and thus it drew a larger audience. On television, it ran on NBC in prime time from 1949 to 1952, and on daytime from 1954 to 1955. See Tim Brooks and Earle Marsh, The Complete Directory to Prime Time Network and Cable TV Shows, 1946–Present (New York: Ballantine Books, 1995), 668.


12 “Minutes of Red Commercial and Sustaining,” March 11, 1941, folder 80, box 95, Program Department, NBC Collection, Wisconsin Historical Society.
Family (NBC, 1932–1959) and Those We Love (NBC, 1938–1943). It also inspired sponsor confidence, as shown by the seven-year contract signed by Standard Brands in 1939. Thus, although the program was unique and idiosyncratic in many ways, it merits special attention as an industrial model and cultural bellwether.

One Man’s Family and the 1950s Family Sitcom. Inattention to radio history has led many television scholars to claim that the 1950s family sitcom was a distinctive televisual creation that aimed to solve television’s unique dilemma of selling consumer goods within the “sanctity” of the family circle. Only the TV sitcom was both “wholesome” and inoffensive enough to bridge the gap between advertisers and the intimate family sphere. As Nina C. Leibman observes, “one of the best ways to encourage consumer families to watch a program and buy the products was by example, presenting television consumer families as ‘typical’ visions of American family life that the viewer would want to emulate.” Through this new program form, Lipsitz claims, television achieved a new level of “penetration of the family” with “incessant propaganda for commodity purchases.”

A closer look at radio history, however, shows that broadcasters and audiences were grappling with these problems well before the TV era. As early as the mid-1920s radio broadcasters expressed concern over the problem of bringing advertising and entertainment into the “genteel” middle-class home without violating the “aura of the family circle.” As advertisers developed programs directly for sponsors, they turned to family themes and “upscale” domestic settings that allowed listeners to imagine the kind of home life that could be realized through proper consumption. By 1940, with radios in more than 80 percent of US homes, and sponsor-produced programs dominating prime time, the “penetration of the family” by commercial propaganda was well under way. A closer look at One Man’s Family, then, provides an opportunity to explore how these new consumer practices were embedded within a family structure that attempted to safeguard patriarchal whiteness in a time of social insecurity.

Indeed, this study argues that the unique combination of melodrama and patriarchal whiteness in One Man’s Family made it a significant precursor of 1950s family sitcoms. While it resembled a soap opera in its sentimental style and ongoing story lines, it differed from most other serials in its masculine focus and its claim to aesthetic quality and realism in representing domestic life. As Hilmes argues, US networks developed a strongly gendered distinction between their “quality” prime-time programs (marked by “masculine” artistry) and their lowbrow daytime offerings (characterized

13 Dunning, On the Air, 855.
14 “Life in One Man’s Family Will Continue over Air Waves for Seven More Years,” Newsweek, November 13, 1939, 32.
16 Leibman, Living Room Lectures, 252. See also Spigel, Make Room for TV, 142.
by a “feminine” formula). In light of this, it is not surprising that *One Man’s Family* was one of the few serial programs that was not relegated to daytime in the mid-1930s.\(^\text{20}\) The emphasis in *One Man’s Family* on white masculinity and sound artistry—under the guidance of its auteur creator, Carlton E. Morse—helped it hold a “quality” time slot through the late 1940s.

While not itself a situation comedy, *One Man’s Family*’s position in prime time made it a model for middle-class family life on 1950s television. First, as a long-running radio success story, *One Man’s Family* was one of the early radio programs adapted to television. It aired in prime time for three seasons, from 1949 to 1952, and it featured such talent as Eva Marie Saint, Tony Randall, and Mercedes McCambridge.\(^\text{21}\) Second, few shows devoted as much care to the creation of domestic family life as *One Man’s Family*, particularly through the development of enduring family customs and holiday traditions. On both radio and television, then, the serial provided a blueprint for the “family drama” format of the situation comedy that emphasized close-knit family relations and sentimental traditions.\(^\text{22}\) Third, the masculinist approach of *One Man’s Family* to melodrama suggests an early model for the situation comedies that Leibman argues would be better described as “domestic melodramas” with an added laugh track. According to Leibman, domestic melodramas like *Father Knows Best* celebrated fatherly authority and positioned women as threats to the white, middle-class American family.\(^\text{23}\) These were both themes that dominated *One Man’s Family* in the late 1930s and early 1940s.

**Theorizing the Sound of Whiteness in *One Man’s Family*.** Radio scholars have tended to approach the problem of white subjectivity by examining the performance of blackness, beginning with Hilmes’s classic study of the *Amos ‘n’ Andy* radio show.\(^\text{24}\) Drawing on work by Toni Morrison, as well as W. E. B. Du Bois and James Baldwin, Hilmes argues that the program’s representation of blackness was an effort to define the “not me” of American culture. *Amos ‘n’ Andy*’s “blackvoice” minstrel characters performed white American identity by showing what it was not: undisciplined, irrational, and incompetent in the face of modern life.\(^\text{25}\)

More recently, Derek Vaillant has argued that radio’s representations of whiteness relied on both the presence and the absence of African Americans and their cultural forms. While black Americans were largely excluded from network radio, the performance of blackness by whites was a mainstay of the medium—either through


\(^{23}\) Leibman, *Living Room Lectures*, 27, 181.

\(^{24}\) An exception is Alexander Russo, “A Dark(ened) Figure on the Airwaves,” in *Radio Reader*, 257–276.

\(^{25}\) The use of blackface was both a denial of black subjectivity and an expression of deep desire for an imagined black identity. As *Amos ‘n’ Andy’s* Freeman Gosden observed, when he put on “blackvoice” he could be more creative, more accomplished, and funnier than he was without it. Thus, the blackness of *Amos ‘n’ Andy* represented not only the “not me” of American culture but also the “wish-I-could-be” of white subjectivity. See Lott, *Love and Theft*, 38; “Amos ‘n’ Andy”: *Anatomy of a Controversy*, VHS, directed by Bob Greenberg and Stanley J. Sheff (Burbank, CA: Avery Home Video, 1986).
minstrelsy or through the adaptation of African American musical forms like jazz and blues.26 In both dramatic and musical programming, network radio performers deployed blackness to construct the racialized “outside” of American culture.

As noted already, however, One Man’s Family was part of a new trend in 1930s radio to represent the normalized “inside” of American culture. The program’s patriarch, Henry Barbour, was a young boy when his family moved to California from the Midwest in the 1870s, and he fulfilled the promise of westward expansion by building a successful stock brokerage and settling his family in the exclusive Sea Cliffs neighborhood of San Francisco. The Barbour family represented neither immigrants nor migrants, but rather pioneering “native” Americans who settled the American West. As the head of the family, Henry was upright, old-fashioned, and stubborn, and yet tenderhearted when it came to his family. He frequently disagreed with his wife, Fanny, over the upbringing of his “bewildering offspring,” but he also betrayed a deep dependence on her as caretaker and companion. While he often doted on his daughters, Hazel and Claudia, his relationship with his sons, Paul, Clifford, and Jack, was marked by more conflict than care as he struggled to maintain his authority and they strained against it.

Paul and Clifford were the main protagonists, whose life decisions and romantic entanglements drove much of the drama on the program. While Paul was the rational caretaker of his younger siblings, Clifford was the impulsive playboy who found himself in constant conflict with his father over his career choices and love interests. As the youngest son, Jack often found himself in moral danger—along with his sisters—with Paul coming to the rescue. As the oldest, Hazel was the most stable Barbour child, although she encountered extraordinary challenges in both marriage and motherhood. Claudia, Clifford’s twin, who shared his tempestuous nature, was also central to family drama during the years under study here. In particular, Claudia chafed against the bonds of marriage with her loving and patient husband. Both Barbour daughters married into extreme wealth, in contrast to the sons, who never achieved their father’s level of economic success.

White Domesticity and American Empire. The domestic drama of One Man’s Family moved back and forth between sentimental celebrations of everyday family life and revelations of harrowing threats to the domestic sphere. Both internal and external challenges stretched—but never broke—the norms of white, middle-class propriety. To interpret the performance of whiteness in One Man’s Family, it helps to draw on the work of a number of scholars who have tied sentimental celebrations of middle-class domesticity to both internal and external projects of US imperialism. Taking late-nineteenth-century educational reform as her focus, Laura Waxler, for example, shows how reformers aimed to impress Native Americans with “the universal superiority of the middle-class, white, Christian ‘home’” and to erase “the history and

the recent defeat of their own alternative modes of living.²⁷ For educational reformers and other participants in nineteenth-century sentimental culture, the celebration of the white, middle-class domestic sphere went hand in hand with the destruction and domination of nonwhite cultures.

Like nineteenth-century reformers, twentieth-century cultural producers continued to sentimentalize the middle-class home and to position it as a necessary counterpart of imperial dreams both at home and abroad. Catherine Jurca productively investigates the relationship of the 1912 novel Tarzan of the Apes to both colonialism and the rise of the white suburb. She shows how the author, Edgar Rice Burroughs, conceived of Tarzan's family home as an outpost against the "savage" subjects of empire and as a model for a domestic suburban development ("Tarzana") that he financed and built in the San Fernando Valley in 1922. Prewar suburbs like Tarzana aimed to segregate and defend white, middle-class families from the "foreign" threats residing in American cities.²⁸ One Man's Family, also situated in a prewar suburb, expressed a similar preoccupation with perceived threats against the white family. The centrality of cultural representations of the family to public visions of the nation is further explored by Melani McAlister, who observes that, "like the nation itself in foreign policy discourse, the family is imagined as continuously imperiled, under threat from within and without."²⁹ As the United States faced the internal threats of the Great Depression and the external threat of World War II (both of which were often explicitly expressed in racial terms), the writers and performers of One Man's Family mobilized whiteness as a key component of the middle-class home. As Dana Nelson argues, whiteness was a response to the problem of social control: it was a means of stabilizing divisions within the social body and projecting social anxieties onto nonwhite territories, bodies, and identities. In the case of One Man's Family, the available bodies of white women and the imagined bodies of Native Americans became the focus of these projected anxieties.³⁰

"Indianness" and Whiteness under Siege. Nelson and Wexler are among many recent scholars who have focused attention on the construction of Indianness in relation to normative Americanness.³¹ Cultural studies by Philip J. Deloria, Shari Huhndorf, and others take an in-depth look at how performances of Indian "savagery" were used to define American "civilization." As Deloria notes, however, this relationship has historically been deeply contradictory: "Savage Indians served Americans as oppositional

²⁹ Melani McAlister, Epic Encounters (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 11.
figures against whom one might imagine a civilized national self. Coded as freedom, however, wild Indianness proved equally attractive, setting up a ‘have-the-cake-and-eat-it-too’ dialectic of simultaneous desire and repulsion.” In Nelson’s terms, Indianness functioned “not simply as a mythological oppositional/negative contrast to ‘white’ identity, but as something more complex and flexible than that, less indicative of an achieved identity for white men than of their ongoing anxieties about it.”

Similarly, One Man’s Family creator Morse invoked imagined Native Americans both to mark the boundaries of the white, middle-class family and to register the instability of whiteness as a cultural category during the 1930s and 1940s. Two-thirds of the direct references to nonwhite groups in One Man’s Family scripts and recordings were references to American Indians. While racial references were relatively few (only twelve total in sixty-four scripts and one recording) and seemingly offhanded, my analysis shows that they were significant in highlighting and punctuating key narrative themes about white masculinity.

Why did Morse draw so heavily on the category of “Indianness” to flesh out the whiteness of the Barbour family? In part, his doing so can be attributed to Morse’s location in the West and proximity to the Western as a genre in literature, pulp fiction, and film. The Western frontier hero was typically a white man whose achievement of racial and gender supremacy represented the imperial destiny of the United States. In the case of early film Westerns, Richard Abel argues that these frontier stories were part of a larger discourse that sought to rejuvenate “Anglo-Saxon” identity in the face of mass immigration and class conflict, promoting white male supremacy as a basis for national identity. Richard Dyer and others argue that this was particularly true of the Hollywood Western, in which national success was represented in terms of white male dominance over an indigenous, ethnic other.

Morse’s aesthetic and ideological connection to the Western genre came through his work as a writer of adventure and detective stories. As Christopher Breu argues, several scholars have demonstrated the genealogical connection between the frontier hero and the hard-boiled detective. The first radio shows that Morse produced at station KGO in San Francisco were adventure and detective stories, including Barbary Coast Nights (KGO and NBC West Coast Network, 1933) and Dead Men Prowl (KGO

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32 Deloria, Playing Indian, 3. Lott identifies a similar dialectic of desire and repulsion in constructions of blackness in American culture.
33 Nelson, National Manhood, 61.
34 Racial references from the script sample and the December 28, 1941 recording are as follows: American Indian, six; white, two; “hillbilly,” one; “desperados,” one; “Caledonian slave,” one; and “darkest Africa,” one.
38 See Cynthia S. Hamilton, Western and Hard-Boiled Detective Fiction in America: From High Noon to Midnight (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1987); Slotkin, Regeneration through Violence; Breu, Hard-Boiled Masculinities.
and NBC West Coast Network, 1931).39 Between 1939 and 1944—during the height of One Man’s Family’s popularity—Morse wrote and directed I Love a Mystery for NBC, starring three of the leading men from One Man’s Family (Michael Raffetto, Barton Yarborough, and Walter Patterson). Now considered a classic of old-time radio, I Love a Mystery (NBC, 1939–1952) focused on members of the A-1 Detective Agency who solved cases in exotic and dangerous locations.40 Morse drew on the same sound and narrative resources in fashioning the domestic sphere of the Barbours as he did in creating the international adventures of I Love a Mystery. In fact, he reported that it was productive and stimulating to write for the “sweetness and light” of the Barbour family and the “dark” world of detective shows at the same time.41 Morse thus seamlessly coproduced the national “inside” of the white, middle-class family and the national “outside” of imperialist adventure in his popular radio productions.

Networking Middle-Class Americanism. A closer look at the conditions of production of One Man’s Family reveals the role that national networks played in promoting representations of the white, middle-class family during the 1930s and 1940s. The show’s production practices provide a window onto the larger shift from working-class to middle-class program themes and formats that accompanied the rise of the national networks and, specifically, the sponsor system. In turn, these institutional and creative changes promoted a new kind of sound realism that delineated a rarefied white space for the Barbour family.

In his study of the comedian Fred Allen, Alan Havig cites Allen’s working-class Irish upbringing and experience as a vaudeville small-timer as formative to his radio satire.42 Allen’s story resembles that of many network radio performers from working-class and immigrant backgrounds who honed their skills for years on the vaudeville circuit before moving to the radio medium. Many of the radio shows that rose to network prominence in cities like Chicago and New York relied heavily on well-worn vaudeville routines based on minstrel, ethnic, and working-class traditions.43

This was not the case, however, with programs like One Man’s Family, which drew on middle-class theatrical and literary traditions. Morse, for example, took inspiration from The Forsyte Saga by British writer John Galsworthy.44 In addition, the writers and performers of these shows tended to come from middle-class backgrounds. In the case of One Man’s Family, Morse was a college-trained reporter and writer, and the principal members of the cast were college graduates who were active in theater at the University of California.45

41 Ibid., 517; Sheppard, “One Man’s Family,” 10.
43 Hilmes, Radio Voices, 106. Prominent examples are The Jack Benny Show in New York and Amos ‘n’ Andy in Chicago.
44 Dunning, On the Air, 516. The Aldrich Family (NBC, 1939–1953) was based on a hit Broadway play.
The rise of middle-class radio shows closely followed the triumph of the sponsor system in network radio. The sponsor system meant that national advertising agencies were in charge of creating radio shows to promote their clients’ goods. This brought increased professionalization and centralization in radio production, as well as growing prosperity for the national networks. With sizable production budgets, advertising agencies sought out professional writers and actors and turned increasingly to Hollywood as a resource and model. The networks followed the agencies, and in 1937 NBC expanded its West Coast operations and consolidated production in Los Angeles. Hollywood exerted a strong conservative influence on program content and promoted whiteness as a moral and aesthetic ideal.

*One Man’s Family* anticipated this trend. In 1933 it was the first national network serial to originate from California, thus heralding the rise of West Coast radio production. *One Man’s Family* was handpicked for production by Don E. Gilman, NBC’s vice president for the West Coast who would soon become head of Hollywood production, “in charge of the bulk of NBC programming in the 1930s and 1940s.” Gilman was personally associated with the program through his son, Page Gilman, who played Jack Barbour throughout the series. In a 1929 speech, Gilman championed radio’s ability to disseminate middle-class American speech, civics, and social customs, thereby repairing the cultural consequences of immigration. He predicted that “wholesale broadcasting coupled with restricted immigration cannot fail eventually to unite the entire American people into closer communion than anything yet achieved in the history of our development.” Morse’s *One Man’s Family* seemed particularly suited to Gilman’s vision of radio as a medium of middle-class Americanism.

**Sound “Realism” and the Production of Whiteness.** One of Morse’s distinctive production practices was the use of sound and narrative strategies to create lifelike family talk. Instead of performing in front of a live studio audience and projecting their voices as in theater or vaudeville, the cast of *One Man’s Family* spoke in relatively low and intimate tones. Morse claimed that this “natural” style was new to radio in the mid-1930s: “After the first few shows we did out of San Francisco transcontinentally, New York said, ‘Speak louder. Talk up.’” Morse replied that the actors were using normal voices and that the engineer would have to live with it. The style was successful,

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49 Sheppard, “*One Man’s Family*,” 41. When NBC consolidated its West Coast productions in Hollywood in 1937, the show and the entire cast relocated from San Francisco to Los Angeles. Newton, “1937: Radio Panic in San Francisco.”
50 Himes, “*Invisible Men*,” 313.
52 Gilman, quoted in Himes, “*Invisible Men*,” 314.
and “within a year or so there were half a dozen shows in which dialogue was done with a sense of naturalness and not stage techniques.”

The “natural” quality of the program was also a result of the close rapport between Morse and the cast. Morse directed the show and wrote the scripts from week to week, so he was able both to write to the strengths of the actors and to let the actors’ interpretations of their characters and situations shape the scripts. The result, Dunning observes, was “unprecedented realism.” “Never, it was repeatedly stressed, had anything remotely approaching the lifelike qualities of One Man’s Family been presented on American radio.”

The “complete naturalness” of the Barbour family was also a sign of its whiteness. In the context of the ethnic, working-class traditions that shaped early radio performance, Morse’s production strategies marked the Barbour family as distinctly middle class and white. In contrast to the loud, often ethnically accented voices heard in other evening serials and comedies, Morse positioned the voices of One Man’s Family as “natural” and unmarked. As Dyer argues, whiteness secures its power by claiming to be normal and ordinary and, therefore, universal. While the low, familiar tones used by the cast of One Man’s Family claimed to represent normality, they also betrayed fear about the stability of that norm and the security of the domestic sphere.

Morse also used vocal strategies to create one of the dominant narrative themes to emerge from the script sample: the contrast between the safety of the Barbour home and the threatening world outside. In particular, Morse frequently invoked the tactile voice of actor Michael Raffetto, as eldest son Paul, to demarcate the “civilized” space of the family circle. For example, in a 1940 episode titled “November Comes to Sea Cliff,” Raffetto narrated the opening description that was typically given by the announcer: “And the living room glows and is alive with movements and the hearth fire snaps and sizzles over a green log . . . Laughter and chatter and pleasantness within, barricaded against the damp, gloomy prowling restlessness without.” In this example and others, Raffetto’s deep, velvety voice could soften and broaden to convey the comforting warmth of the hearth and could tighten and sharpen to portray the “prowling” threat outside.

Morse’s painstaking construction of the domestic setting of the program included his decision to locate the Barbour family home in the real-life garden suburb of Sea Cliff, San Francisco. Sea Cliff was one of a number of village-like residential enclaves

53 Morse, quoted in Sheppard, “One Man’s Family,” 80.
54 Sheppard, “One Man’s Family,” 78–82.
55 Dunning, On the Air, 517.
56 “Life in One Man’s Family Will Continue,” 32.
57 Dyer, White, 44, 47.
58 Morse used the contrast as a means of celebrating family solidarity, a strategy for selling the sponsor’s product (tea), and a metaphor for the threat of world war. Carlton E. Morse, “One Man’s Family” Looks at Life (Standard Brands, 1938), n.p.
60 See also “The Last of 1941” recording. Raffetto sounded similar in pitch and resonance to Orson Welles.
created by community leaders following the 1906 earthquake to keep wealthy San Franciscans from abandoning the city. Featuring “large and lushly landscaped lots and bucolic suburban surroundings,” these garden suburbs offered both easy access to urban resources and separation from other urban dwellers. Like Tarzana and other prewar suburbs, Sea Cliff was designed as a place where “white American civilization could thrive in isolation and where ordinary middle-class people could think of themselves as extraordinary Anglo-Saxons.” By situating *One Man's Family* in Sea Cliff, Morse both signaled the privileged status of the Barbour family and cloaked that privilege in the Jeffersonian values of independence and self-sufficiency.

At the same time, Sea Cliff’s unique location on a bluff overlooking the Pacific Ocean and the Golden Gate Bridge gave the Barbour's pastoral home a precarious, edgy quality and allowed Morse to easily signal the whiteness of the Barbour family circle through the contrast of “civilized inside” and “wild outside.” In one episode, the announcer opens by stating, “Dark clouds have drifted through the Golden Gate and now the Sea Cliff area of San Francisco is being drenched in a steady downpour. But all is snug at the Barbour's.” In another episode, the Barbour family enjoys a “glowing fire, flickering on the walls and glinting the woodwork,” while foghorns, rain, and wind sound effects signal threatening storms outside.

The tension between civilized family home and wild coastal storms became explicitly racialized in the weeks following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. The December 28 episode, “The Last of 1941,” opened with a typical description of the family gathered around the fireplace while a storm raged outside. As the youngest son, Jack, opened a window to get some fresh air, the domestic space of the Barbour family—and of *One Man's Family* radio listeners—was flooded with the deafening sound of driving wind and rain. After shutting the window, Jack exclaimed: “Boy, you’d think ten thousand Red Indians were whooping and hollering out there from the sound of things!” Clifford, the middle son, elaborated on Jack's quip by attributing the noise to “Rain Devils” who have “faces like monkeys with spike horns” and come out only on stormy nights. This sound-image not only resembled the animal-like images of the Japanese enemy that circulated during the war but also explicitly used “Indianness” to mark the “uncivilized” world outside the white family home. Under siege by thousands of “devilish” Indians, the Barbour family stood in for the assailed nation on the brink of war.


63 See also Morse, “Scripts,” December 29, 1937, 1.

64 Morse, “Last of 1941” recording. See also Morse, “Scripts,” December 21, 1938, 2.

65 Morse, “Last of 1941” recording.

The Social Stakes of Whiteness. As this example suggests, the context of impending war played an important role in shaping the performance of white domesticity in One Man’s Family during the 1936 to 1941 period. Along with the war, it is essential to look at the broader social context of the interwar period to make sense of the domestic discourse of the show. In particular, the growing public presence of white women and nonwhite Americans in the urban landscape in the years following World War I challenged the prerogatives of white masculinity. Morse was one of many who identified World War I as a watershed between a secure, traditional world and an unstable, modern one. In this view, the patriarchal, middle-class family was the primary victim of the social change following World War I. As Morse claimed, “It was, really, the beginning of juvenile delinquency on the one side, and divorce and apparent lack of concern in parents for their children [on the other].” He explicitly conceived of One Man’s Family as a means of regenerating traditional middle-class family life and, thereby, shoring up white masculinity.

The Depression exacerbated the perceived threat to white masculinity and traditional gender relations, as white men lost status because of unemployment, underemployment, or a shift to nontraditional work. Although the labor market was deeply segmented by race and gender, the Depression generated new competition across these lines. For example, white men began to displace white women in the traditionally female fields of teaching, nursing, library work, and social work. As Lois Scharf observes, this move “increased competition among women all along the occupational scale. For many women the result was a dramatic downward plunge.” The “downward plunge” of white women, in turn, displaced black women in the workplace, even in positions historically held by black women.

Increased competition over scarce resources put extraordinary stress on workers and their families and helped galvanize public opinion in support of white male privilege and traditional gender relations. Working women, particularly married women, were roundly condemned for taking jobs that could have supported entire families if held by men. At the same time, however, the Depression necessitated women's work.


68 See, for example, Herbert Blumer and Philip Hauser, Movies, Delinquency, and Crime (New York: Macmillan, 1933); Wandersee, Women’s Work.


73 Scharf, To Work and to Wed, 50.
Not only were women unable to leave the labor force; more women than ever were forced to enter it. As Scharf argues, the result of this contradictory situation was “growing workforce participation, but diminished economic status.” In this environment, efforts to address the Depression crisis focused almost exclusively on ameliorating the economic position of white men.

As Lipsitz and others have noted, New Deal policies played a key role in consolidating and institutionalizing white privilege during the 1930s via housing, workplace, and family provisions. The Federal Housing Act of 1934, for example, channeled the majority of home-loan money to white Americans. In addition, both the Wagner Act, which protected workers’ rights to unionize, and the Social Security Act, which established old-age insurance, excluded farm workers and domestic workers, the majority of whom were nonwhite. When Social Security provisions were expanded in 1939 to cover the wives and dependents of male workers, nonwhite women remained predominantly uninsured. Faced with the economic crisis of the Depression, then, the New Deal state stepped in to protect the “wages of whiteness” at the direct expense of nonwhite Americans.

Efforts to protect the prerogatives of whiteness, however, cannot be disentangled from efforts to secure gender privilege. For example, Social Security insurance excluded more than 75 percent of female workers by failing to cover domestic workers, agricultural laborers, educational workers, nonprofit workers, retail salespeople, government office workers, and part-time laborers. In addition, Social Security’s family provisions tied men’s citizenship rights to their roles as wage earners and women’s rights to their roles as dependent wives and mothers. By institutionalizing white breadwinner husbands and homemaker wives, Social Security and other New Deal provisions helped to create the “traditional” nuclear family that dominated the post-war landscape.

In 1939, the Social Security Administration produced its own radio serial, Pleasantdale Folks (NBC, 1939–1940), to explain the new family provisions of the Social

74 Between 1920 and 1940, female participation rates in the paid work force increased from 37.5 to 45.6 percent for women between the ages of twenty and twenty-five and from 21.7 to 30.5 percent for women aged twenty-five to forty-four. See Michael A. Bernstein, The Great Depression (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 66–67; Helmbold, “Beyond the Family Economy,” 629, 639.

75 Scharf, To Work and to Wed, 165.


79 Lipsitz overlooks the long-standing scholarship on the gendered nature of New Deal social policy, including Mintz and Kellogg, Domestic Revolutions; Wandorsee, Women’s Work; Scharf, To Work and to Wed; Mink, The Wages of Motherhood; Kessler-Harris, Gendering Labor History.


Security Act. One of the central goals of the program was to convince women to embrace their dependence on male breadwinners as the best means of achieving economic security.82 As the following analysis suggests, the connection between white female dependence and white male privilege was key to the narrative of One Man's Family, as well as to that of Pleasantdale Folks. In both public policy and popular culture, female independence threatened both manliness and whiteness. As Kessler-Harris argues, “Like the wages of whiteness, the wages of a normative masculinity include a sense of entitlement to particular kinds of jobs, skills, and economic security. And as the concept of white privilege is imbued with gendered prerogatives, so the concept of male privilege is imbued with racial license.”83 White women marked the boundary of whiteness; they were the keepers of racial purity and thus a constant threat to that purity.84 Women who challenged traditional gender roles were a threat to the white family and a threat to the race. In the case of One Man's Family, whiteness became a primary tool for buttressing male authority by cracking down on female independence.

In this context, another major narrative theme emerged from the script sample: the “internal” threat of white women to domestic whiteness. As a lifelong homemaker, Fanny Barbour seems an unlikely threat to the white, middle-class home. Indeed, as a devoted wife, mother, and grandmother, Fanny frequently bemoans the selfish “modern women” of the 1930s who neglected their families and were “probably directly responsible for ninety percent of divorces.”85 However, in the familial discourse of One Man's Family, all women have the potential to corrupt and compromise the traditional family home and thus the moral strength of America. As the woman in the Barbour family with the most authority, then, Fanny has to be carefully policed and contained.

The internal threat posed by “Mother Barbour”—as she is often called—is identified and isolated in a number of episodes. During the Christmas broadcast of 1940, for example, family members play Santa Claus and distribute Christmas presents to each other. When his turn comes, Paul playfully declares that he is going to give Mother Barbour an eyebrow pencil for Christmas. Before Fanny can respond, Henry immediately interjects: “Nothing of the kind, Santa Claus. . . . I won’t have my wife making up her face like a Red Indian!”86 The eyebrow pencil, like the flapper’s bobbed haircut, takes on symbolic meaning as part of a complex discourse of “commodity Orientalism” that links women to frerer sexuality, companionate marriage, modernity, and consumerism.87 Although the humor of Paul’s suggestion depends on Fanny’s distance from the “Orientalist vamp” signaled by the eyebrow pencil, Henry’s response figuratively marks his wife as an Indian insurgent in the domestic sphere.

In another example, Henry offers a similarly racialized description of Fanny in direct response to her assertion of authority and control. In the 1938 New Year’s
episode, Fanny decides to turn the family conversation away from gloomy world events by telling everyone’s fortunes with playing cards. Although she insists that it is only a game, she sounds very serious about her predictions. In fact, this is a clever narrative strategy designed to give listeners a preview of plot developments in the coming year. When Fanny turns to Henry, he adamantly refuses to have his fortune told. “Fortune telling! The next thing you know you’ll be putting feathers in your hair and doing a snake dance to bring rain.” As Fanny takes command of the conversation and asserts knowledge of future events, Henry again identifies her body as racially marked, in contrast to the unmarked whiteness of his own authority.

Fanny is, in fact, a woman who frequently speaks her mind and disagrees with Henry on family matters. While these disagreements are important plot devices, they also highlight the menacing potential of Fanny’s independence. For example, in one episode the children speculate on whether their mother would take Clifford’s side (as she often does) in a disagreement with his father. Although Hazel agrees with Jack that Fanny would likely support Cliff, she defensively concludes that Fanny’s influence is no match for Henry’s authority. As she observes: “Yes, but it’s times like this when you discover it really is Dad, after all, who’s head of the House of Barbour.” In another episode, Paul makes a similar observation about his father’s authority when he remarks, “You know, Mother, I think you’d have made a rather imposing Matriarch but for the fact that Dad’s so definitely the head of the house.” These self-conscious assertions of patriarchal power actually conveyed the opposite: perhaps male authority in the home was not secure and female prerogatives could not be so easily contained.

**Hard-Boiled Homebodies: Paul and Clifford Barbour.** The performance of white masculinity in *One Man’s Family* drew extensively on the adventure-detective genre in which Morse, and key members of the cast, regularly worked. In particular, the actors who played male homebodies Paul and Clifford (Raffetto and Yarborough) drew on their experience in crime and adventure programs to create unique voice performances that both asserted and questioned male authority in racial terms. Specifically, the “grain of the voice” of the actors carried traces of their performances in crime and detective shows. For example, Raffetto’s deep, resonant voice intoned the crime fighter’s rational authority in his performance of Paul (Figure 2). In contrast, Yarborough’s performance of Cliff drew on his many

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89 Morse, “Scripts,” January 19, 1938, 12A.
roles as the crime fighter's "sensuous sidekick" who was ruled by his heart rather than his head. His softer, lilting voice and greater emotional range positioned Cliff as a man whose class and race position was unstable.91

As noted already, Paul was central to the drama of One Man's Family as both a moral protector of the family and a central love interest.92 His character was largely formed by the crisis of World War I, when, as a pilot, he was shot down over France and severely wounded in the leg. This injury forced him to walk with a cane for the rest of his life. He also lost his young wife, an army nurse, in the influenza epidemic.93 When he returned to San Francisco, he moved into an attic apartment in his parents' large home. Paul continued to fly airplanes occasionally and supported himself by giving flying lessons, but he spent most of his time reclusively in his loft. His duties as family philosopher, go-between, and counselor, however, kept him busy on the domestic front.

In essence, Paul returned from the war as a ghost. Both his location in the attic and his association with the "heavens" through flying gave him an otherworldly quality. Paul's airplane—a prosthesis for his disabled body that seemed to escape the limits of the physical world—figured prominently in his efforts to protect his family from immoral forces. For example, Paul used his plane to get rid of Danny Frank, a former lover of Hazel's who was trying to get back into her life. As a portrait painter who rejected family, convention, and society, Frank posed a moral threat to Hazel. Paul's response was to kidnap Frank and fly him across the country to New York, where he could no longer endanger his sister.94 Paul's airplane replaced his earthly body and transformed him into a guardian angel for the Barbour family.

Paul's otherworldliness was key to his position as protector of the white, middle-class home. As Dyer observes, when whiteness is represented as whiteness, it often takes on a disembodied, ghostly, or deathlike quality. As a manifestation of spiritual cleanliness and order, whiteness as such is expressed in the denial of the body or in its total absence: death.95 While Paul represents the desirability of whiteness as a moral and aesthetic ideal, his pure whiteness (death) alienates him from the productive (and reproductive) world of his father. During a conversation about which of the sons might take over Father Barbour's business when he retired, Paul excluded himself by wryly observing, "I'm no earthly good."96 Paul was unable to participate in the business world, just as he was unable to marry and produce a family. Although his whiteness was shown as debilitating, it was simultaneously represented as deeply desirable.

91 Raffetto's and Yarborough's voices must be situated in the interwar period when male baritones pushed out tenors as the more "masculine" and "natural" male singing voice. See Frith, Performing Rites, 194; and Allison McCracken, "'God's Gift to Us Girls,'" American Music 17, no. 4 (1999): 385–386.
92 Despite being an object of longing for countless young women, including his adopted daughter and his niece, Paul never found lasting love or romance.
93 Dunning, On the Air, 517.
94 Morse, "Scripts," November 18, 1936, 20–21. For another example, see Morse, "Scripts," December 2, 1936, 28.
95 Dyer, White, 16, 76–77.
96 Morse, "Scripts," December 5, 1940, 3.
The desirability of whiteness as an unattainable source of virtue and rationality was expressed most vividly in Paul’s ghostly voice, which was shaped by the unique experiences of actor Michael Raffetto. Like Morse, Raffetto got his break in radio with a crime show that he wrote and pitched to station KGO, Arm of the Law (KGO and NBC West Coast Network, 1930), in which he played a charming district attorney. He also starred in several of Morse’s crime and mystery shows, including playing the part of Jack Packard in I Love a Mystery. While Packard had some qualities of the disaffected, hard-boiled detective, Dunning describes him as “a master detective and strategist, a cool head in any emergency, the voice of reason and decisive action.”

In both his detective and serial scripts, Morse wrote to Raffetto’s authoritative voice. His deep voice, with its accentless middle-class diction, carried an authority that seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere. Paul often quoted from essays and poems, read important correspondence, delivered extended opinions on various subjects, and acted as a kind of narrator for the program. A typical example of his didactic speech comes from a family discussion of World War II in which Paul opined: “War is bad, but the dictator ideology is impossible. If we make that a personal slogan, and if every other citizen will keep that thought, the American civilian population is doing its greatest good for an assurance of victory.” Raffetto’s voice, which delivered the line with clarity and measured force, carried the grain of quasi-legal authority that he frequently portrayed in his radio and film work. While Paul’s body was of limited use, his voice reached out with the moral authority of whiteness to protect and preserve the middle-class home.

Clifford was similar to his brother Paul in two main ways: he also served as a major love interest for the program, and he was similarly unable to live up to his promise as a productive middle-class man. Cliff’s character was largely shaped by a deep conflict with his father over his choice of profession. Although he wanted to be an actor, Henry forbade this “unproductive” pursuit and forced Cliff into the business world. Cliff never found success or even stability in this world, and he was the only member of the family to struggle with unemployment during the Depression. Not only did Cliff fail to fit into the middle-class world; he frequently posed a threat to that world through his social and emotional instability (Figure 3). While Paul

Figure 3. Barton Yarborough played Clifford Barbour on One Man’s Family from 1932 to 1951 (Stars of the Radio [San Francisco: Broadcast Weekly, 1932], “Radio” Vertical File, San Francisco Public Library).

97 Sheppard, “One Man’s Family”; Dunning, On the Air.
98 Dunning, On the Air, 337.
99 Raffetto’s experience as a diction teacher may have added to the invisible authority and didactic force of his voice. Raffetto’s command of “unmarked” American English erased the audible signs of his Italian ethnicity and signaled his successful “Americanization.” Jim Cox, The Great Radio Soap Operas (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1999), 138.
100 Morse, “The Last of 1941” recording. See also Morse, “Scripts,” December 29, 1937, 7.
redeemed his lack of productivity through his spiritual purity, Cliff’s strongly physical and sensual nature posed a direct threat to white, middle-class morality. For example, Cliff’s marriage to Ann failed because she could not give him the degree of physical intimacy that he desired. After the demise of his marriage, Cliff’s sensual needs were portrayed as increasingly threatening. In one episode, Cliff put his arm around his sister-in-law, Betty, and provoked a jealous reaction from Jack, and in another he aggressively pursued a recently divorced woman despite her vocal objections. Paul and Fanny confronted Cliff about his inappropriate behavior, and Fanny strongly chastised him for “indulging in a sensual spree that is neither fitting or becoming to a man of your breeding.” By invoking his white, middle-class “breeding,” Fanny drew on both racial and class referents to indict Cliff for his lack of self-control.

Along with his sensual “excesses,” Clifford faced criticism for his lack of economic and emotional independence. When Cliff expressed despair over his inability to find a job, Paul commented, “Not to be able to bring home the bacon today, puts a man in the same category as the Indian warrior who could not kill his buffalo or defend his family against the neighboring enemy.” The Depression threatened not only the manhood of men like Cliff but also, more generally, the security of the white, middle-class family. Cliff’s economic struggles put him in the same category as an Indian: outside of the boundaries of white, middle-class civilization. Clifford faced similar criticism for his emotional weakness. Frustrated by his older brother’s inability to stand up to his father, Jack asked Cliff accusingly, “Well, you’re free, white, and twenty-one aren’t you?” Like other members of the family, Jack registered Cliff’s lack of autonomy and control in racial terms. According to them, Clifford’s lack of emotional and economic independence threatened his ability to properly enact whiteness.

The precariousness of Cliff’s whiteness was also conveyed by the voice performance of actor Barton Yarborough. Yarborough was a native of Texas who ran away from home at a young age and began performing in vaudeville and theater. He started on radio in Morse’s early series, and by the 1940s he was performing in numerous radio detective and adventure shows. His film career in gangster melodramas of the 1940s was also extensive. His voice was not as deep as Raffetto’s and carried a soft Southern drawl that gave him a slower, lilting style of speech. Instead of the rational authority played by Raffetto, Yarborough played characters such as Doc Long in I Love a Mystery, whom Denning describes as a “lover of women, picker of locks, willing fighter in tight spots.” Some of his sidekick characters, such as Sleepy Stevens, Brazos John,

101 After returning from a disappointing honeymoon, Cliff demanded that his wife talk to a doctor about an incompatibility in their relations.” Morse, “Scripts,” December 5, 1937, 7, and January 9, 1938.
102 Morse, “Scripts,” January 7, 1940, and December 3, 1939, 4.
104 Morse, “Scripts,” January 16, 1938, 22.
106 Dunning, On the Air, 337.
and Ben Romero, were given names that explicitly marked them as nonwhite. The melodic tone and off-balance delivery that Yarborough developed for these characters continued in his performance of Cliff and stood in contrast to the resonant authority of Raffetto’s voice.

If Paul’s voice signified the absence of a body, then Cliff’s voice signified its presence. In contrast to Paul’s physical disability, Clifford’s limitations were mental and emotional. Cliff endured mental crises throughout the series, and, in one episode, he even suffered a brain injury in a car crash, which resulted in a metal plate being put in his head. Cliff’s lack of mental and emotional control stood in stark contrast to Paul’s rational authority. For example, in one episode, after Cliff and his wife Ann had a major confrontation in which she slapped him and he threatened to spank her, Paul rushed over to see what was going on. Cliff was very upset and said that Ann would not “be a wife to him.” When she humiliated him and called him a “clown,” he threatened to whip her. Paul responded: “Whip! Were you mad? . . . What were you thinking of?” Cliff was no longer able to speak and began half crying and half laughing hysteric. His cries soon turned into heavy sobs, and the scene ended. While Paul attempted to safeguard the middle-class family, Clifford was completely stripped of speech, reason, and authority.

**Conclusion: All of Morse’s Men.** Shoring up white male authority within the domestic sphere was a central preoccupation of *One Man’s Family*. Morse found resources for his project in the adventure-detective genre, and in two of the actors with whom he worked closely, Paul Raffetto and Barton Yarborough. As Jack Packard in *I Love a Mystery*, Raffetto was detached, decisive, and rational. He brought these same characteristics to *One Man’s Family’s* Paul Barbour, and he used them to celebrate and secure the white domestic sphere. His deep, resonant voice was the principal medium for this representation of whiteness. However, his hard-boiled masculine traits were also a source of alienation from intimate social relations and from the embodied self. Yarborough’s Clifford Barbour provided a corrective to this condition by performing the physical, emotional, and sensual excess so often associated with the raced and classed “other.” Because Cliff’s passionate and melodic voice carried this threat into the domestic sphere, however, his position in the family remained unstable, his presence in the home disquieting.

Scholars have remarked on the way in which Morse modeled his radio characters on the actors with whom he worked closely for decades. The actors, too, were shaped by their performances of Morse’s characters. In a profession that required hours and hours of rehearsals and performances every week for years on end, the cord that divided art and life must have become thin and frayed. It seems poignant, then, that Raffetto, whose voice carried the ethereal weight of whiteness in Morse’s productions, was ultimately forced to leave *One Man’s Family* in 1955 because of a “voice affliction.”

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110 Sheppard, “*One Man’s Family,*” 80–84; Dunning, *On the Air*, 516.
And Yarborough, whose characters represented the triumph of the heart over the head, died of a heart attack at the age of fifty-one.\footnote{Another member of Morse’s cast died an untimely death: Walter Patterson committed suicide in 1942. He played Claudia’s husband, Nick Lacy, on One Man’s Family and Reggie Yorke on I Love a Mystery. Dunning, On the Air, 337, 514.}

This study investigates the radio roots of a discourse of domestic whiteness that is typically associated with family sitcoms of the 1950s. Through the analysis of a single, highly popular evening serial, One Man’s Family, I track the production of white domesticity in the institutional and social contexts of 1930s radio. My analysis shows radio whiteness to be a complex discourse, constructed through the interaction of sound and narrative and embodied in the vocal performances of gendered identity. In the text of One Man’s Family, whiteness provided a means of disciplining female independence and asserting male prerogatives. In Dyer’s terms, whiteness took on substance in One Man’s Family in two main ways: in contrast to a racialized American Indian other and through the representation of physical isolation, alienation, or death. Although isolating and debilitating, whiteness was still held up as a dominant and desirable ideal, particularly through the voice-character of Paul Barbour.

In observing the continuities between the 1930s and the 1950s—between radio and television—I do not intend to diminish what Hilmes, Douglas, and others characterize as the transgressive and insurgent potential of radio broadcasting in the United States. However, investigation of the industrial context of radio production, as well as the broader social context of economic insecurity and social retrenchment, certainly does indicate important similarities between the late 1930s and the early 1950s and suggests the need for further research on the performance of whiteness in both radio and television. For example, a study of the specific production goals and strategies of advertising agencies and their network counterparts may provide new insights into the construction and deployment of middle-class whiteness under the sponsor system. A comparative analysis of the performance of whiteness in specific radio and television programs might also help flesh this out. Clearly, there remains much interesting work to be done on the institutional and aesthetic formation of white domesticity over the airwaves.

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