

# Reel History: Black Mothers in the Media Postwar United States, 1945–1980s

## Course Description

This course examines Black motherhood as a shifting cultural formation in U.S. media from 1945 through the 1980s. Through film, plays, periodicals, and television—from *Imitation of Life* to *Good Times* to films like *Finding Christa*—we trace how Black women’s maternal lives have been rendered as sites of discipline, care, labor, and constraint.

Beginning with mid-century representations shaped by postwar liberalism, including *A Raisin in the Sun*, the course follows the transformation of Black motherhood through the civil rights era, the expansion of the welfare state, and the emergence of Black feminist critique. Drawing on Ruth Feldstein’s *Motherhood in Black and White: Race and Sex in American Liberalism, 1930–1965*, we situate these representations within broader debates about race, gender, sexuality, and citizenship.

Across these materials, we ask: How has Black motherhood functioned as a site of cultural projection and political struggle? What role has the state played in shaping expectations of maternal care and responsibility? And what possibilities emerge when Black women’s lives strain against—or refuse—the limits of normative motherhood?

## Course Objectives

By the end of the course, students will be able to:

- Analyze representations of Black motherhood in film and television
- Situate media texts within postwar U.S. history
- Engage key concepts such as respectability, labor, and state regulation
- Develop critical arguments through written and visual analysis
- Reflect on how the media shapes cultural understandings of family and care

## Course Materials

### Core Texts (Selections):

- *Motherhood in Black and White: Race and Sex in American Liberalism, 1930–1965* – Ruth Feldstein
- *The Street* – Ann Petry
- *Sula* – Toni Morrison
- *Meridian* – Alice Walker

### Films & Television:

- *Imitation of Life* (1959)
- *A Raisin in the Sun* – Lorraine Hansberry
- *Claudine* (1974)
- *Killer of Sheep* (1978)
- *Finding Christa* (1991)
- *Good Times* (selected episodes)

## Assignments and Evaluation

- **Weekly Response Papers (30%)**  
Short reflections connecting readings and media
- **Midterm Analysis (25%)**  
Close analysis of a film or TV text
- **Final Paper (35%)**  
Research-based or analytical essay
- **Participation (10%)**  
Active, thoughtful engagement in class

## Course Expectations and Policies

This course asks you to engage seriously with complex histories and representations. Your role is not only to complete assignments, but to contribute to a thoughtful and respectful learning environment.

### Attendance and Participation

- Two absences allowed without penalty
- Additional absences affect participation
- Participation includes listening, speaking, and engaging respectfully

### Late Work and Extensions

- Short assignments:  $-\frac{1}{3}$  letter grade per day
- Major assignments:  $-1$  letter grade per day

If you anticipate difficulty:

- Reach out before the deadline
- Extensions are available in cases of illness or emergency

### Collaboration and Use of Generative AI

You are encouraged to discuss course materials with peers, but all submitted work must be your own.

AI tools may be used for:

- brainstorming
- clarifying ideas

AI tools may not be used to:

- generate or replace your written work

If used, briefly acknowledge how.

### Classroom Environment

We will discuss race, gender, and inequality. You are expected to:

- engage respectfully
- listen carefully
- contribute thoughtfully

Disagreement is welcome, but must remain constructive.

## Use of Devices

Devices may be used for course purposes only. Please minimize distractions.

## Campus Resources

Students are encouraged to use available support:

- **Academic Support:** <https://success.gatech.edu/tutoring>
- **Student Well-Being:** Georgia Tech Student Resource Guide

## Final Note

This course is designed to be rigorous, thoughtful, and supportive. If you have questions, concerns, or need support at any point, please reach out.