Alison J. Clarke. *Tupperware: The Promise of Plastic in 1950s America.* Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1999. x + 241 pp. $29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-56098-827-4.

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The OTHER Other Fifties

In recent years, two separate impulses have spurred much of the scholarship on 1950s America. The first has been the drive to demystify the predominant image of the decade as a postwar golden age of consensus and contentedness. This image, recurring in popular culture and still invoked by contemporary politicians and social critics, limns the fifties as innocent "Happy Days," an era of suburban solace and national unity that was shattered by the cultural and political excesses of the 1960s. Scholars have taken pains to recover the "other" fifties, showing us how social ferment, civic anxiety, and cultural transformation better typified this far more complex decade.[1] What's more, several observers have disputed the notion that the 1950s and the 1960s were radically discontinuous periods in American history. Seeking to unearth the "seeds of the sixties," such work traces the way minor cultural currents of the fifties, like the power critiques advanced by C. Wright Mills, or the multicultural themes engaged by black and Jewish writers, became major social preoccupations of the 1960s.[2]

A second impulse behind fifties scholarship has been the critical need to achieve a more nuanced understanding of the cold war. A panoply of studies have contended that the politics of the cold war were not just made manifest in U.S. foreign relations and domestic McCarthyism. Rather, the rhetoric and ideology of the cold war impacted myriad aspects of American society, from home life to youth culture to literature and film.[3] Rejoining

this school of "cold war culture" studies, still other scholars question whether postwar political imperatives really enjoyed such hegemonic influence. Their critical stance urges us to view the cold war as only a partial explanation for the changed culturescape of 1950s America, as only one factor to be considered side by side with the demographic shifts, economic developments, artistic innovations, and social crises of the era.[4]

These two scholarly trends, along with their attendant internal debates, have certainly advanced a more sophisticated portrait of the 1950s than the one lodged in our popular imagination. Yet in their haste to elucidate the other "Fifties" or the other "Cold War," commentators run the risk of recontaining the period within these familiar categories, while their actual subjects languish in the shadow of larger interpretive discussions about the relationship between politics and culture. How refreshing, then, to find a study of postwar society willing to work unconstrained by either critical context, ardent to converge relentlessly on its singular subject, yet surprisingly capable of anatomizing the fifties in new and compelling ways. Alice Clarke's *Tupperware: The Promise of Plastic in 1950s America*, focuses our attention on an everyday object that was at once "mundane and extraordinary": plastic kitchenware. Seeking to understand how Tupperware has achieved such iconic status in the United States, Clarke focuses on the artifact's cultural context as much as its business and technical history. The result is a deft interpretation of the "Tupperization" of 1950s America, as Clarke examines the various processes of cultural me-

diation, such as suburbanization, postwar shifts in gender relations, and changing consumption practices, that transformed Tupperware into more than just a curious design artifact.

According to Clarke, functionalism alone cannot explain the cultural significance of Tupperware. Sure, the plastic container's unique tight seal, sonorously realized by the famous "Tupper burp," allowed consumers to thriftily preserve pre-prepared or leftover food items. But this pragmatic function, even coupled with the product's modern streamlined design, was not enough to induce Americans to buy Tupperware when it first appeared on the market in the 1940s. Earl Silas Tupper, a New Hampshire tree surgeon and visionary inventor, created his first polyethylene bell-shaped container around 1942. His fledgling plastics company proceeded to churn out canisters, refrigerator bowls, and other such merchandise throughout the forties, putting the items up for sale in department stores and mail order catalogues. Tupper, a utopian thinker and impassioned entrepreneur, envisioned a wasteful society transformed by his sleek, economical, unbreakable home products. However, sales flagged, and Tupper grappled with a means of turning Tupperware from a mere novelty into a household staple.

Salvation came in the form of Brownie Wise, a divorced single mother from Detroit who was selling Tupperware door to door to pay her son's medical bills and supplement her secretarial salary. She had logged considerable sales figures, and an intrigued Earl Tupper sought to discover her secret. Wise had shrewdly recognized the enormous home demonstration potential of Tupperware, and the undeniable success of her direct sales approach convinced Tupper to withdraw his kitchenware from retail outlets in 1951 and distribute the product exclusively in the form of the Tupperware party. In particular, the burgeoning suburbs of the 1950s were targeted as a "picnic ground for direct selling" (p. 100). He hired Wise as vice president of his newly incorporated Tupperware Home Parties (THP), and the two proceeded to divide the company labor: Tupper focused on design, while Wise dealt with promotion and public relations.

Wise, an adherent to the self-help psychology of "positive thinking" that pervaded much of postwar American culture, devised a flexible, organic, horizontal management system aimed at empowering her predominantly female sales force. She created a potent public image of THP as a "woman's world" (even though 75 percent of the executives were male), and THP's corporate

mythology promulgated stories of "shrinking violets" transformed into self-assured individuals by their experience as Tupperware dealers. Wise established an ornate headquarters in Orlando, Florida, a Tupperware Mecca that hosted yearly jubilees attended by some 2,000 dealers. She invented lavish corporate rituals and flamboyant gift-giving schemes to reward dealer performance. She was the first woman ever to be featured on the cover of *Business Week*. Unquestionably, Earl Tupper's company was transformed by the advent of the Tupperware party and the ascension of Brownie Wise; by 1954, Tupperware boasted 20,000 members in its sales network and enjoyed a triple increase in profits from the previous year.

Despite Tupperware's success, the partnership between Tupper and Wise did not last. She was dismissed in 1958, following a series of contentious battles with Tupper that commenced after the company founder learned that Wise had purportedly used a Tupperware bowl as a dog dish. Soon after Wise's dismissal, Tupper sold the company, renounced his U.S. citizenship over frustration with tax laws, and eventually moved to Costa Rica. His subsequent autobiographical accounts of Tupperware's history never even mentioned Wise and her impact on the company. As for Wise, she went on to head Viviane Woodard Cosmetics. Tupperware, however, has obviously lived on. Today, as Clarke informs us, "a Tupperware party takes place somewhere in the world every 2.5 seconds, and an estimated 90 percent of American homes own at least one piece of Tupperware" (p. 1).

Clarke melds archival research at the National Museum of American History with oral histories of women who hosted Tupperware parties or worked for the company (interview subjects include senior citizen mall walkers in Orlando). She effectively charts the rise of Tupperware as business, product, and "cultural marker" in the 1950s, arguing that Tupperware, as a symbol of both thrift and consumer abundance, embodies a broader historical shift "from the Depression economy to a postwar boom" (p. 3). To her credit, Clarke does not reduce Tupperware to yet another expression of cold war ideology, though she does acknowledge the power of "containment" as a political and cultural metaphor in fifties society. Nor does the book accuse Tupperware of propagating an "Ozzie and Harriet" vision of postwar homogenization and domestic subordination. In fact, the author urges readers not to dismiss "the lives of nonradical women involved in a feminine popular culture that embraced consumerism and glamour" (p. 120). For Clarke, the Tupperware story is a valid aspect of women's history. Indeed, she identifies moments when Tupperware

culture actually inverted gendered power relations: in Tupperware promotional films, executives were always filmed walking ten paces behind Brownie Wise; at one corporate jubilee in Florida, the male executives, wearing only boxer shorts and dressing gowns, were directed on stage by Wise as they performed provocative twists and twirls before a whooping female audience. In a similar vein, *Tupperware: The Promise of Plastic in 1950s America* upsets prevailing critical contexts for viewing postwar society, and it reminds us why material culture must continue to matter in current historical scholarship.

Notes

[1]. See, for example, Joel Foreman, ed., *The Other Fifties: Interrogating Midcentury American Icons* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1997); Lary May, ed., *Recasting America: Culture and Politics in the Age of Cold War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989); Joanne Meyerowitz, ed., *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994); Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-63* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988).

[2]. Such as Richard H. Pells, *The Liberal Mind in a Conservative Age: American Intellectuals in the 1940s and 1950s* (New York: Harper and Row, 1985) and Morris Dickstein, *Leopards in the Temple: The Transformation of American Fiction, 1945-1970* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002).

[3]. For example, see Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1988); Leerom Medovoi, "Democracy, Capitalism, and American Literature: The Cold War Construction of J. D. Salinger's Paperback Hero," in *The Other Fifties*, ed. Foreman, pp. 255-287; Alan Nadel, *Containment Culture: American Narratives, Postmodernism, and the Atomic Age* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1995); and Richard J. Corber, *In the Name of National Security: Hitchcock, Homophobia, and the Political Construction of Gender in Postwar America* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1993).

[4]. See the essays collected in Peter J. Kuznick and James Gilbert, eds. *Rethinking Cold War Culture* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001).

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