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HIST 225 Section 33 – American Dreamscape Entry

### SEXUAL REVOLUTIONARY

Bettie Mae Page (April 22, 1923-December 11, 2008) is a cultural icon of beauty, fashion, and sex. She became famous in the 1950s for her scandalous semi-nude, nude, and bondage modeling. Bettie revolutionized the stigma around the representation of women and sex in media and culture at a time in America where such ideas were repressed. Bettie's life furthers the idea that one's contribution to society is as equally a part of the "American Dream" as achieving a life of wealth or power.

Most Americans can agree that an individual who has reached a substantial level of happiness and satisfaction with their life, whether through a career, hobby, or relationship, are living the American Dream; however, personal accomplishment is not the only mark of a successful life. A fundamental piece of the American Dream is one's contribution to culture and society. Bettie Page is one such proponent of this idea who unintentionally made a long lasting impact on American culture with her contribution to pop culture and the ushering in of the sexual revolution.

Bettie Page was a popular pin-up model during the late 1950s, who was known for her nude and bondage modeling in men's magazines and camera club photo-shoots. At this time in America, sex was extremely controversial and anything that was remotely sexual was taboo. Thus, Bettie's openness with her sexuality and her body during such a period of time was revolutionary in of its self. She saw sex as nothing more than a natural and normal part of human life.<sup>1</sup>

There were countless laws and committees created by the government to repress and control sexual promiscuity, of which Bettie had a few encounters. During a nude photo-shoot on a farm, she was arrested for indecent exposure. Bettie refused to plead guilty and declared that she was not indecent.<sup>2</sup> Bettie had another brush with the law while working for a bondage and fetish photographer, Irving Klaw. Her work with Klaw was popular with many rich and successful men, who requested images of Bettie in numerous costumes and positions. Klaw was soon arrested by Senator Estes Kefauver on the charge of distributing pornography; however, none of his work contained nudity or scenes of sexual acts. The senate committee asked Bettie to testify against him but she boldly refused. A judge also ordered Klaw and his photographers to destroy all his negatives of Bettie and his models.<sup>3</sup>

Bettie's long lasting influence on American culture can be seen in the movies, music, and fashion of today, including a large cult following with countless merchandise, comics, and fan art featuring her like and name. Bettie's iconic black bangs, whips, fishnets, and high heels, are seen across media in movies like *Pulp Fiction*, in music videos by Katy Perry and Beyoncé, and on the runway in Paris, London, New York, and Milan.<sup>4</sup> Bettie had set precedence for photography, style, fashion, and the representation of women in media. Many women, artists, and designers, then and now, look to Bettie for inspiration on the ideal exemplification of beauty and sexuality in women.

Bettie's idolized form in pop culture is a contrast to her roots and life behind the scenes. A simple southern girl from Nashville, Tennessee, Bettie was born out of a childhood of poverty and sexual abuse by her father. Despite the hardships of her youth, she graduated at top of her high school. Bettie enrolled in college to pursue teaching, but she soon switched studies with the dream of becoming an actress. It was only by chance and out of necessity to make a living that she started modeling after being offered to have her photos taken in New York. It was only a short time later that Bettie had become famous in the industry of erotic and pinup photography. The American Dream is

idealized as achieving a life of happiness and fulfillment, but Bettie's life, though influential in American culture, is far from that fantasy. After modeling for a few years, Bettie disappeared completely from the public eye. During her retirement out of the spotlight, Bettie experienced many struggles while living off Social Security benefits, including the end of her subsequent marriages. She was later diagnosed with schizophrenia and sent to a mental institution for several years. For the rest of her life, she continued to live humbly and unaware of the extent of her impact. In interviews, she revealed that she was confused as to why she was so popular and could not believe it herself.<sup>5</sup>

If looking at Bettie's life through the context of the idealized American Dream, one could say she failed; however, the true achievement of the American Dream is her success in inspiring pop culture, revolutionizing sex, and opening the doors for millions of American women to openly express themselves. In an interview only two years before her death in 2008, Bettie said: "I want to be remembered as I was when I was young and in my golden times . . . I want to be remembered as a women who changed people's perspectives concerning nudity in its natural form."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Essex, Karen, and James L. Swanson. *Bettie Page: The Life of a Pin-Up Legend* (Los Angeles: General Pub. Group, 1998), 158.

<sup>2</sup> Essex, Karen, and James L. Swanson, 81.

<sup>3</sup> Mori, Mark, *Bettie Page reveals all* (United States: Music Box Films, 2013).

<sup>4</sup> Essex, Karen, and James L. Swanson, 261-263.

<sup>5</sup> McFadden, Robert D. "Bettie Page, 85, Dies; Queen of Pinups." *New York Times*, December 12, 2008, [https://www.nytimes.com/2008/12/12/arts/12page.html?rref=collection%2Ftimestopic%2FPage%2C%20Bettie&action=click&contentCollection=timestopics&region=stream&module=stream\\_unit&version=latest&contentPlacement=7&pgtype=collection](https://www.nytimes.com/2008/12/12/arts/12page.html?rref=collection%2Ftimestopic%2FPage%2C%20Bettie&action=click&contentCollection=timestopics&region=stream&module=stream_unit&version=latest&contentPlacement=7&pgtype=collection)

<sup>6</sup> Sahagun, Louis. "Pinup queen Bette Page dies at 85." *Los Angeles Times*, December 12, 2008, <http://www.latimes.com/local/obituaries/la-me-page12-2008dec12-story.html>