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## **Conclusion: What's Australia got to do with it?**

Through the chapters, we've seen that a large majority of the Australian authors prompted to write of their time in France are women, and that there are strong patterns in the stories they tell of belonging in France and of creating a new life/new self there, and of modelling themselves on French women, real or imagined, historical or mythical figures. We've seen stories reflecting the gloss of romance with French places, uncomplicated by the messiness of intercultural relationships, stories of a disciplined makeover of oneself in French surrounds in order to create a more beautiful life, stories of luxury domesticity in France achieved for a few months a year, as timeout from everyday life. And we've seen stories of resisting this narrative, or of engaging with it to divert it to other purposes, positioning oneself in relation to it without necessarily embracing it.

Driving the book has been the title question—what's France got to do with it? After chapters exploring themes associated with France and themes emerging from the memoirs, the answer seems to be: *not a lot*. The memoirs recount time spent in France, but more often than not they stem from something that has little to do with France, French people, French culture, French language or even with the stereotyped trappings of Frenchness, even though, on the surface, these draw the travellers to France. Rather, the strongest thread bringing these books and their readers together is the idea of self-transformation, with France seen as the destination where women can best achieve it. France is used as a

proxy for the quest for a new self, to be deployed back home in Australia. So rather than poring further over France and aspects of Frenchness, it is time to turn back and examine what might be peculiarly Australian about this phenomenon. What is it, then, about Australia that could prompt these patterns? Why do Australian women in particular need to leave the country to reforge their identity? What's Australia got to do with it? While it is beyond the scope of this book to consider all the ramifications of this question, existing research on Australian gender constructions provides a useful springboard to start to answer it.

Following the exploration of Australian constructions of female identity, the chapter compares the contemporary memoirs of Australians in France with analyses of previous generations of Australians writing of their travels to see the extent to which the patterns of the twenty-first-century corpus follow the patterns of the past.

## **Australian constructions of female identity**

Considerable ink flowed on analyses of Australian national identity in the latter half of the twentieth century, and particular attention has been paid since the 1970s to the gendering of national identity. Historians and cultural critics concur that Australia developed an 'unusually masculinist' national culture in comparison to other Western countries (Dixson 1999, 3), due to a variety of influences.

The sex ratio of the Australian population was heavily male-biased from the first arrival of convicts, throughout the nineteenth century when mining and agriculture shaped settlement, and right up until World War I (Grosjean and Khattar 2019). For well over a century, Australia was male-dominated not only socially and symbolically, but also numerically. In tandem with the skewed demographic, the combination of the convict past, iconic frontier occupations for single men, and trade unionism formed an imagination of Australian national identity that was resolutely masculine (Dixson 1999). The archetypal Australian was a solitary, rugged male survivor in tough terrain: the stockman, the bushranger, the soldier (White 1981; Schaffer 1988; Woollacott 2001; Elder 2007; Gill 2012). And the image of a masculine Australia was constructed in relation to a feminine other: whether a British mother country (Elder 2007, 191), Europe more generally (seen as 'tame, domesticated and effete', Pesman 1996, 8), or a landscape construed as enigmatic and casually cruel, a harsh mother (Schaffer 1988).

Meanwhile, actual women were largely invisible, at best peripheral, in the construction of Australian identity and its iconography. Associated with civilisation and the city, they were generally excluded from the founding bush myths (Dixon 1999; Elder 2007) and the identities left to them were limited and polarised (the ‘damned whores and God’s police’ of the title of Summers’s influential 1975 book). They were sidelined too from the Australian value of mateship, which referred essentially to homosocial and fraternal relations, while relations between the sexes remained ambivalent (Dixon 1999; Elder 2007). While mateship reflected an egalitarian philosophy, reducing and even dismantling social hierarchies among men, women were more often associated with maintaining social distinctions (Pesman 1996, 25). This can be attributed to the fact that traditionally their sole means of social advancement was through an advantageous marriage, which was achieved through cultivating status, in simple terms, being a ‘lady’ (Kingston 1986). Pesman synthesises Kingston’s argument:

a man might rise by talent, make a fortune, buy his way to power and privilege, but unless or until his wife was accepted as a lady, they were excluded from élite social circles and social life, and thus the opportunities for the children to secure better social standing and good marriages were limited. (Pesman 1996, 25; cf. Kingston 1986, 32)

Gradually, an alternative ideal of Australian femininity emerged, in the form of the ‘Australian girl’: young, fresh, unpretentious and practical (Kingston 1986; McPherson 1994; Elder 2007, 192; Gill 2012). Where mature Australian womanhood was concerned, however, the dominant ideal long remained ‘the lady’—associated with the Old World, with nobility (Reid Boyd 2012), with a civilising Britishness (Gill 2012, 279) and with European cultural refinement (Pesman 1996, 43). Fiona Gill argues that a competing, home-grown model eventually developed: a rural Australian femininity, marked by an emphasis on egalitarianism, a connection to the bush, and the incorporation of traditionally masculine traits, expressed through a capacity for manual labour (2012, 280–81). Nonetheless, the ideal of the lady prevailed as the key to women’s social mobility into the mid-twentieth century (Reid Boyd 2012, 40). And the virtues of the lady—refinement and culture—were in many ways discordant with the image of Australia and synonymous with Europe.

However malleable we may see ourselves, these currents and influences are not simply shaken off in a generation or two. Grosjean and Khattar (2018) have demonstrated the long-term effects of the skewed Australian

sex ratio in attitudes towards gender roles and women's participation in the labour market. They found a correlation between continued conservative attitudes (realised in women's high marriage rate, low employment level, lack of employment in high-ranking occupations and greater leisure hours) and regions where the sex ratio was historically most uneven, but interestingly only where marriage had been largely endogamous—that is, 'among people born of Australian parents' (4). In other words, they found the cultural persistence of the ideal of the woman who remains in the home and enjoys greater leisure—akin to 'the lady'—stronger in areas with a history of a larger male population, and low levels of migration and intermarriage—that is, less ethnically diverse, less influenced by other cultures.

These analyses of the construction of Australian identities—the masculinity of the idealised Australian, the lack of place afforded historically to feminine Australian identities and the limitations and resonances of those identities (the lady, the Australian girl, the rural woman)—go some way towards explaining certain aspects of the corpus of memoirs. Indeed they offer push factors to match any pull factors offered by France. In particular, they provide a basis for understanding why Australian women of Australian heritage feeling dissatisfied with their identity may not find Australia the most conducive site for exploring alternatives.<sup>1</sup> They also suggest motives for the continued appeal of France as a pole of identification for Australian women.

Far from relegating the feminine to the fringes of national myths, France has elevated traditionally feminine domestic arts into the venerated domains of *haute couture*, *haute cuisine* and *les arts décoratifs*, making them central to the country's self-branding over four centuries (DeJean 2005). And in stark contrast with the invisibility of women in Australian symbolism, we find that the most salient emblems of France are female figures. On the one hand, there is Marianne, the ubiquitous symbol of the French Republic since the Revolution, appearing on French coins, postage stamps, statuary and even the government logo, and embodied in official iconography by a series of celebrities (Agulhon 2001). On the other hand, Joan of Arc, appropriated as a symbol of France for various ideological purposes over the centuries, has become a rallying point for French conservatism, nationalism and Catholicism (Richard 2012;

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1 In Chapter 2 we noted the ethnic homogeneity of the authors, all with Anglo-Australian backgrounds bar Marisa Raoul.

Winock 1998). The emblems of both left and right are powerful feminine figures. Together, the marketing and symbols of France amount to a visible celebration of the feminine in French culture, with the result that France represents a potential magnet for feminine identification.

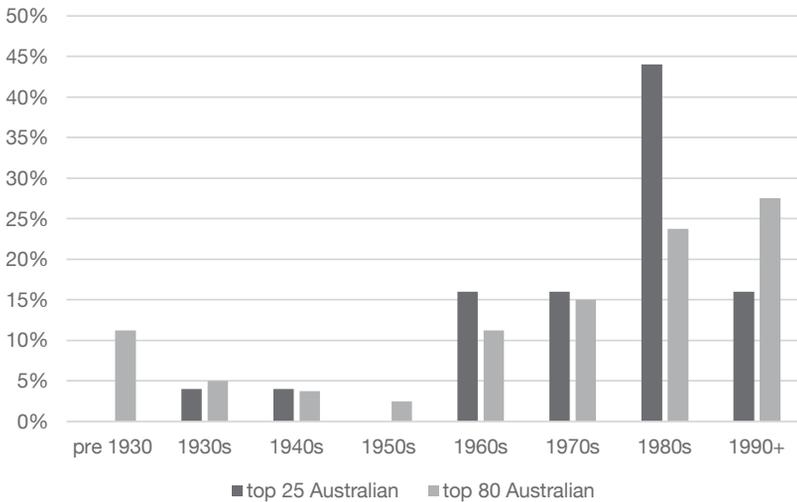
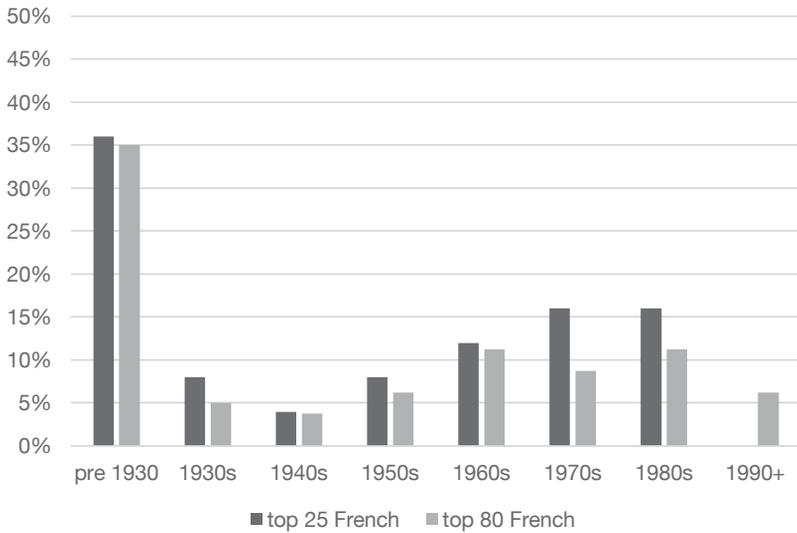
Beyond these conspicuous images of the French nation are a diverse range of illustrious French women, past and present, whose fame stretches to Anglophone cultures. A google search for 'famous French women' shows a banner of headshots.<sup>2</sup> Of the first 10 on the day of writing this paragraph, two were born in the nineteenth century (Coco Chanel and George Sand) and only two were born after 1960. In contrast, the first 10 women on the banner of 'famous Australian women' are all from the entertainment industry, and the most senior was born as recently as 1964. We find a similar range of Frenchwomen and lack of range of Australian women on the website 'thefamouspeople.com'. Constantly updated to reflect the vagaries of stardom, its methods unstated, the site is not necessarily an accurate gauge of fame, but is a barometer nonetheless of the spectrum of high-profile personalities readily available to the Anglophone imagination. Figure 11.1 compares the birth dates of those top-ranked in the lists of famous French and Australian women.

Whereas six of the top 25 on the French list were born between 1295 and 1883, and a majority born before 1960, only two of the Australian list (Olivia Newton-John and Germaine Greer) were alive prior to 1967. And while a third of these French women are famous for achievements outside the entertainment industry, that is the case for only two of the Australians. The skewed proportions continue when we consider the top 80 candidates (the entire first screen of results on the web page), where 41 per cent of the French but only 10 per cent of the Australian figures were born over 100 years ago, while only 9 per cent of the French but 36 per cent of the Australians were born in the last 30 years. In other words, the perception of iconic Australian women is overwhelmingly an image of youth, in particular of young actresses and singers, whereas the perception of iconic French women includes a far greater range of ages, of historical periods and of domains of activity. These then are the French and Australian women who most readily spring to mind among Anglophones, indicating that women over the age of 40 and women of the past are far less prominent in the public imagination of Australian women than of French women.

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2 [www.google.com/search?q=famous+French+women](http://www.google.com/search?q=famous+French+women) (accessed 28 Aug 2018).

WHAT'S FRANCE GOT TO DO WITH IT?



**Figure 11.1: Year of birth of famous women filtered by nationality.**

Source: Author's summary of data from [www.thefamouspeople.com](http://www.thefamouspeople.com), 28 August 2018.

Australian women over 40 or approaching 40, however, are precisely the demographic in question in this book. The age at which the female Australian memoirists published their first memoir of life in France ranges

from 35 to 71, with an average age of 49 years. They would struggle to find women of their own vintage or models from the past in the Australian list above. Is it any wonder, then, that when Lucinda Holdforth looks for models for her future direction—‘At the age of thirty-five, as I start the rest of my life, am I not simply wondering this: How to be? Or more exactly, how to be *as a woman*?’ (2004, 158, original italics)—she turns away from Australia and looks to France, where an abundance of models is available? She could even be referring to the lists of the famous when she writes, ‘In Australia we do girls very well: young, fresh, ignorant, sexy girls. [...] In France they like women, grown-up women’ (169). Is it any wonder that Nadine Williams looks towards a less youth-obsessed culture than Australia in seeking models for her new life as a widow (2017, 161–63, 262)? Or that Patti Miller (2015) identifies with Annie Ernaux and other French women of letters to write her memoir? Or that Katrina Lawrence (2017) cites dozens of women from French history as potential role models for each stage of womanhood?

Many of the authors write at a turning point in their lives, and turn to France in search of a new self, a new life, a new way of being in the world, confident that France is where such changes are possible. The legacy of Australian constructions of identity outlined in this chapter makes it unsurprising that when Australian women seek to redefine or remake themselves, they seek to do so elsewhere. This is particularly the case if, like so many of the female memoirists, they desire to identify with a feminine ideal that is associated less with practicality, self-reliance, manual skills and an ability to withstand adversity, than with romance, style and everyday luxury. In other words, if the quest for a new self is a postfeminist one, our history makes it difficult to imagine Australia as a likely venue for a successful transformation. Indeed, France appears to lend itself much more readily to this quest, hence the reference to a desire to ‘be French’ or have a ‘French life’ as a shortcut reference to a feminine ideal somewhat removed from more down-to-earth virtues.

Those authors whose quest diverges from the path of elegance and retail pleasures, however, still find France a place to model and remodel themselves: Maureen Cashman as village author, Sheryle Bagwell and Sarah Turnbull as journalists, Henrietta Taylor and Nadine Williams as

widows, Elaine Lewis as bookshop proprietor, all as memoirists. Some reference their models explicitly, the presence of French women in the public imagination making a variety of projections appear available.

For Australian women, then, France provides an elsewhere into which an alternative sense of self can be projected and invested, inspired by an accessible array of possible identifications. Travel to France enables and validates the transformation, but the journey is essentially an internal one, a journey of the self, with elements of its origins—its *raison d'être*—most likely to be found deep within Australian culture and history.

## Past and present Australian travellers

The authors whose memoirs are the subject of this book are not the first Australians to write of their travels. Although the life-in-France memoirs are a contemporary phenomenon, travel to Europe by Australians has a history almost as long as travel from Europe to Australia. At this point it is useful to situate the corpus in relation to other accounts of Australian travellers and their writings, to mark out the continuities and discontinuities in what they seek and find, and to identify what is specific to twenty-first-century memoirs of Australians' travel to France.

The first point of comparison concerns a discourse of comparison: the notion that elsewhere is somehow better. In the corpus we have seen the strength of the theme of a better life in France. The memoirists are of course not alone in seeking to enhance their lives through travel. Refugees are by definition seeking a better life abroad, and majority of voluntary migrants likewise seek to enrich their lives in some way. The memoir authors, however, are not refugees, rarely migrants, and often not even long-term sojourners, and the better life to which they refer is often seen as something to be brought home and lived out once back in Australia. What then are the contours of 'betterment' in this corpus? At first glance, they could be seen as the continuation of an influential prior discourse of Australian inferiority. Is the idealisation of France simply a remnant of the cultural cringe?

## Cringe or confidence?

The travel to Europe of an earlier generation of Australians has been interpreted through the prism of the ‘cultural cringe’ (Alomes 1999). Coined in 1950 by Arthur Phillips, the ‘cultural cringe’ denoted an inferiority complex on a national scale, a feeling that real culture was happening elsewhere, that home-grown talents were substandard, and that creative artists needed to succeed overseas before they could be considered successful in Australia. Germaine Greer, Barry Humphries, Robert Hughes and Clive James are among the most notable of those who sailed for Europe in the late 1950s and early 1960s on the strength of this belief, leaving behind an Australia seen as culturally deprived.

This discourse is almost entirely absent from the memoirs of corpus, all published after 2000 and recounting travel in the 1990s and onwards. John Baxter, a contemporary of James and Greer, stands out as the exception among the authors, portraying Australia as a cultural backwater. His view is not shared by the others, not even by those of comparable age, such as Elaine Lewis, who on the contrary tirelessly promoted Australian literature and culture through her bookshop in France. Harford reflects on the change in attitude in her study of contemporary Australian expatriates, a book with the telling title *Leaving Paradise*. She explains that today’s expatriates are less likely to be seeking fame and fortune as creative artists and more likely to be leaving behind established careers when they depart Australia (Harford 2006, 110). Indeed she notes that the 1960s memoirs of expatriation now appear ‘quaint’ and other-worldly (7). Today’s Australian travellers no longer think of Australia as insufficient or unable to compete on the world stage, and the cultural cringe has become a non-issue. Nikki Gemmell, in her Foreword to *Australian Expats: Stories from Abroad* sums up the shift:

Unlike many of those Australians who left their country in anger and frustration in the fifties and sixties—the Greers, the Hughes et al—the current generation doesn’t seem to have that burning desire to put Australia behind them once and for all. We travel to enrich our lives, but a lot of us now aim to bring that experience home at some point, to enrich our nation. The question is when. (2003, 10)

And yet the word ‘better’ appears repeatedly in the memoirs: wanting to ‘live a better life’ (Bennett 2012, 7), ‘be a better person’ (McCulloch 2008, 56; Nielsen 2007, 12), ‘play a better song’ (Lawrence 2004, 70) in

a state of heightened sensation such that ‘everything seems to smell better, taste better, feel better, sound better and even look better’ (Webster 2012, 77). It is not necessarily the case that the authors see France as a better country than Australia, but that France is seen as a site for creating a better life, or at the very least, a better lifestyle. This is the discourse of personal self-improvement: betterment occurs at the individual level.

The association of the discourse of self-improvement with travel is persistent rather than new. Richard White, writing of World War I soldiers, notes the legacy of the ‘Grand Tour’ of young aristocrats of the Enlightenment era in the Australian experience of Europe: the voyage ‘is intended to be educational, civilising. The idea is to return a better person, not just a browner one’ (1987, 65). In what ways has the discourse evolved among Australians, and more particularly Australian women? Ros Pesman’s analysis of a century of Australian women travellers offers a clear anchor point for comparison with the present-day memoirs, especially regarding demographics, motivation for travel and modes of self-improvement.

## Earlier Australian women travellers

Ros Pesman’s *Duty Free: Australian Women Abroad* covers the period from the 1870s through to the 1960s and predominantly focuses—like the travellers themselves—on destinations across Europe. Pesman draws on letters, travel diaries, oral histories and fiction as well as published memoirs for her analysis (1996, 16), observing that while women were more likely to document their travels than male travellers of the time, their writings were less likely to be published (12). This appears no longer to be the case, certainly where travel to France is concerned, where women authors outnumber the men.

Pesman resists synthesising the narratives into a single stream, instead identifying a range of traditions and myths of travel, ‘some that were universal, and others that were more peculiar to place, time and gender’ (4). Travel motivated by interest in reform, social justice or politics, for example, tended not to have France as its destination. Of the themes Pesman analyses, the chapters discussing the relations between travel and status, aspirations, independence, discovery of the world and discovery of self are the most pertinent to France. These chapters allow us to distinguish both continuities and discontinuities between the Australian women travellers of the past and their present-day counterparts writing about their stays in France.

## Class and status

The century of travel studied by Pesman saw a gradual broadening of the demographics of the Australian woman traveller, from the wives and daughters of the colonial élite to a wider middle class and more particularly to financially independent middle-class women. Not only did the travellers originate from the more affluent classes but both the motivations and effects of travel that Pesman identifies among them are often strongly connected to class, and in particular to the confirmation of their social position. The list of motives for travel that Pesman establishes includes 'for transformation into ladies, for status and privileged speech, for the experience of being there and ticking off the sights, for culture and self-improvement' (1996, 9). Making the journey to Europe enabled Australian women to affirm their own genteel status, and to cultivate themselves (25–26). And while some women travelled with a genuine interest in intercultural encounters, 'there were also women on whom other worlds scarcely impinged, and for whom the benefits of travel lay in joining privileged conversation back at home' (9). In other words, travel not only derived from privilege but also conferred status back in Australia, regardless of the extent of cultural contact or learning while abroad.

Pesman concludes her study by gesturing towards the advent of the jet age, and the possibility of travel becoming much more widely available. Of the 1970s, she writes:

Travel no longer conferred the same privileged knowledge and status as it had in the past. Mass travel, package tours, brought travel somewhere overseas within the range of more and more Australians; trips became shorter, more frequent and more sanitised, and so the association of overseas journeys with rites-of-passage and pilgrimages became weaker. (1996, 200)

For Pesman, this is a pivotal moment in the history of Australian women's journeys, the beginnings of the democratisation of travel. What is striking, however, for a reader immersed in the contemporary writings of Australian women about France, is how little has changed in that regard and how strong the connection with privilege and status remains in the published memoirs. The greater access signalled by Pesman may well have taken place in terms of numbers of travellers to Paris and the financial means required to get there, but is little evident in the relaying of the motives, dreams and discursive uses of time spent in France. It may be true that

travel per se is less associated with status today, but portraying that travel as residence in France, and performing it for an audience of readers as an education in fine living, places it firmly within the tradition of privilege.

Contrary to Pesman's hailing of democratisation, the contemporary crop of memoirs of France are not the products of mass travel and are pitched as the antithesis of package tours. While many may travel to France, a much narrower subset of women have their travel memoirs published. And with very few exceptions, those authors continue to originate from middle-class backgrounds. Tales of shoestring budgets and *au pair* stints are rare. If trips have become shorter in the jet age, the memoirs conversely emphasise length of stay, and finding the wherewithal to remain in France is seldom a topic of discussion. Meanwhile, the association of France with luxury appears relatively stable. Indeed, France itself, and more particularly Paris, remains a pole of identification for middle-class women, as pointed out by demographer Bernard Salt in his tongue-in-cheek classification of an emerging urban tribe:

The PUMCIN is a marketer's dream: the Professional Urban Middle Class in Nice Suburbs. Pumcin men are easily spotted on weekends wearing boat shoes (loafers to some), polos and chinos. Pumcin women believe they have a spiritual affinity with the city of Paris. (Salt 2011)

It would, however, be a mistake to see only continuity here, a carry-over from the past, without delving more deeply into the projections that culminate in these identifications, and into the precise ways in which travel to France enables twenty-first-century Australian women to assert status and privilege.

### Self-improvement: 'For transformation into ladies'?

In her chapter on 'Travel and Status', Pesman identifies a discourse of self-improvement among the travellers of the past and connects it with the limited possibilities for social advancement for women at the time. Young women travelled seeking 'European "finish"' (1996, 30), typical aspects of which were 'an ability to converse in a foreign language, to draw, play the piano and sing, to appreciate art and ruins' (25):

The 'Australians in Europe' newspaper columns leave the impression that late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century Europe was swarming with Australian girls filling in time with lessons in music, art, French, German and Italian. (26)

It is interesting to see emphasis on developing language skills as a part of this cultural veneer (25, 26, 39, 57). Such skills were generally not put to use once the travellers had returned home (30); rather they contributed towards one's status as a lady and one's prospects of a favourable match, for 'the ultimate goal behind the finishing of daughters was the making of suitable marriages' (28). The desire for European finish persisted well beyond colonial times: Pesman reports that 'Young Australian women continued to be sent to finishing schools in Europe until well into the 1970s' (37) and jokingly writes of her own experience as an *au pair* as 'the poor girl's version of the finishing school' (217).

In today's memoirs, France still functions as a kind of finishing school, insofar as it remains the place to acquire cultural refinement, indeed cultural capital. The contemporary authors recount their stay as lessons in living, as 'an education in style, glamour, gastronomy and grace' (McCulloch 2008, 11), as a learning journey (Williams 2007; 2017). The nature of the finish, however, has evolved, as has its payoff. While the importance of good taste, style and fashion remain (Pesman 1996, 36), there is considerably less emphasis on language, music and fine arts, on cultural accomplishments as the measure of refinement. Instead, lifestyle is all important: we read repeatedly of the authors attempting to craft a beautiful life where self, surrounds and daily routines are suffused with style. Cultural capital is no longer acquired by the same means.

Meanwhile, the relationships between travel and the prospect of marriage have largely dissolved for Australian women. Pesman detailed two opposing ways in which Australian women's travel was linked to ideas of marriage: on the one hand, acquiring cultural finish abroad was seen to increase one's chances of finding a well-to-do husband; on the other hand, travel was also a means of avoiding or at least delaying marriage. Among early twentieth-century Australian travellers, Pesman identified a subset of women who travelled in search of independence and careers (1996, 4) and recognised them as her own precursors. These were mainly artists and intellectuals who travelled 'to acquire qualifications, experience and reputation' as the means to 'more independent, self-sufficient, autonomous lives' (81). And among the travellers of the 1950s, she identified a substantial number who resisted the pressure to marry young, and travelled to postpone or indeed escape 'the preordained destiny of home and Hills hoist' (212).

In the corpus of contemporary memoirs, neither attracting a spouse nor avoiding marriage appear to prompt travel. Pursuing a romance with a French partner motivates the move for several authors (Baxter, Turnbull, Raoul, Williams), but divorce (Lewis), a failed romance (J McCulloch, Galt), widowhood (H Taylor, Williams) and a midlife crisis (C Lawrence, Moody) are equally likely catalysts. Career too is less of a driver among the contemporary authors, of whom only Lewis and Stafford travel with what might be called career goals. Indeed Holdforth travels in search of a more satisfying alternative to her well-paid job. On the other hand, several travel specifically to write a book (Cashman, Davis, Miller). Harford, citing expat writers including Turnbull and herself, describes the generational shift thus:

The stories they tell, unlike those told by their forebears, are not of desperate escape acts or bold bids for success but of tentative steps taken away from their established careers in Australia. (2006, 110)

If we look across the corpus, we find that the motivation among the women authors—intersecting with the reasons listed above—can most often be characterised in terms of a desire for personal growth and self-discovery in the form of a French life.

This can be related to discussions of the quest for self-actualisation in the travel and tourism literature (Hudson 1999). In a study of women demographically comparable to the authors of the corpus, Wilson and Harris interviewed Australian and New Zealand women travellers—‘predominantly [...] white and relatively highly educated’ (2006, 164)—about the ways in which they construed their travel as meaningful. Outweighing sights and places, or a ‘search for authenticity and a collection of “cultural capital”’ (161), the themes of ‘1) a search for self and identity, 2) self-empowerment; and 3) connectedness with others/“global citizenship”’ (165) emerged strongly from the interviews. The first two of these themes are equally strong among the female authors of the corpus, although often these are said to be achieved *through* acquiring cultural capital, the accoutrements of a ‘French self’. Interestingly, the third—establishing relationships and interacting with cultural others, feelings of transnational responsibility—although present in a few of the memoirs (notably Cashman, Bagwell and Turnbull), is generally less salient, with a tendency for the memoirs, true to the genre, being more introspective.

## What's Australia got to do with it?

Michael Sheringham, in his introduction to *Parisian Fields*, defines Paris as a 'semantic network [...] whose co-ordinates are determined by the movement of agents or agencies to which it plays host' (1996, 3). The same could, of course, be said of any corner of France, indeed of any place, but the principle is intensified in a city so invested with meaning by inhabitants and sojourners from all parts of the earth.

If self-actualisation is a common theme in accounts of contemporary travel, its form is shaped by specific combinations of traveller and destination, with French destinations more available to Australian travellers for some kinds of self-exploration than others. This is most obvious in the women's memoirs, where cultural paradigms of femininity and gender relations are insistent themes. Europe continues to represent a travel destination particularly suitable for middle-class Australian women, as it was for the earlier generations analysed by Pesman. And France is seen as particularly propitious for the lifestyle-focused 'pilgrimage of self-improvement' (Pesman 1996, 33). Paris especially attracts those seeking to recreate their life as one of luxury domesticity and idealised femininity, and to present their lives as models for their readers to emulate, in a postfeminist makeover (see Chapter 5) seen as somehow less achievable in Australia.

It is tempting to see this—somewhat depressingly—as simple continuity with respect to the travel of earlier generations, as if, in spite of a revolution in the situation of women, little has really changed. The memoirs testify to the persistence of Cinderella dreams—or rather, Sabrina dreams, the Sabrina of Billy Wilder's 1954 Paris-themed film demonstrating more agency in her self-transformation than Cinderella—with the difference that marriage is no longer the goal in the contemporary tales and financial independence and twenty-first-century freedoms are taken for granted.

And yet, on a more optimistic note, we find competing Australian configurations of life in France in the memoirs. True to Sheringham's definition, the semantic network is complex and unstable. Paris and France are available for other projections of the self, just as Madame de Pompadour is available to the authors as a figure of femininity, seduction, power or dignity. As Pesman noted of the earlier generations, 'While self-discovery-development-transformation is a stock narrative line attached to travel, each woman has her own story' (1996, 187). And so, alongside—

and sometimes even within—the magic makeover stories, we find a range of ways in which the postfeminist fantasy in the form of a ‘French life’ is challenged or subverted.

In Chapter 6, we explored narratives where the fantasy was contested through a prism of class, age or individual history, where nostalgic ideals of domesticity, femininity and romance were tested and found wanting. Interesting was the apparent need to test as well as contest, as if the association of France and postfeminist ideals was so strong that the latter had to be entertained, tried on for size before they could be rejected. In Chapters 7 and 8, we saw less overt challenges to the fantasy, with the hijacking of its tropes to guide the reader beyond matters of lifestyle, and towards intercultural awareness and lessons in language differences. And finally, in several memoirs, the narrative of attaining a French life was undercut by a recognisably Australian brand of self-deprecating humour that ridicules the enterprise, most notably realised in Janelle McCulloch’s second ironic voice, mocking her attempts at elegance. A number of authors reference their down-to-earth origins, and reclaim the straightforwardness that they cite as characteristic of Australian women (see Chapter 10) to ironise their pretensions to a French life, the fabled Australian bullshit radar encouraging them to take a step back from a mythologised self. Although the theme of ‘becoming French’ is a strong and enticing one, clearly, the memoirists are not simply or uniformly duped by their own tales.

Many of the memoirs relate a short-term stay in France, a period of liminality, time out from a career or a sabbatical from the pressures of their usual life. Others tell of a part-time French life, with leisurely periods spent in France and frenzied organisation from afar in-between. Time in France represents an opportunity to take stock and reshape one’s life with emphasis on its aesthetic dimension and the daily enjoyment of small pleasures. Lived fully and in the present, away from hectic schedules, this temporary ‘French’ life generates feelings of belonging in France and represents an ideal to aspire to once back home in Australia. Meanwhile, acculturation, French language proficiency, and acceptance into a local French community remain tangential concerns in what is essentially an inwardly focused process of constructing a more beautiful and fulfilling life.

A minority of the memoirs tell of moving to France long-term and full-time and, in these cases, initial feelings of belonging are harder to sustain. Close intercultural contact on a daily basis tends not to ratify the attempts to perform Frenchness. Identity tourism—trying out an idealised form of Frenchness—gives way to increased feelings of Australianness and more complex identifications, and claims of Frenchness dissipate.

A common thread across the memoirs is the idea that when it is time to take stock and change direction, Australia is not the place to do so. The authors seek elsewhere, and for this subset of Australian travellers—middle-class Anglo-Australians over 35, mostly women—France offers the most obvious opportunities for successfully reshaping one's life. Notions of language and culture play their part, but ultimately the most important work is carried out before departure in the processes of identification that lead them to project their sense of self onto a France seen as a nostalgic mix of style, romance, wine and magic, with prominent role models of feminine empowerment.

## Afterword

It is French week in Brisbane, Australia—a glorious July day of midwinter sunshine. At the local French Festival, a host of businesses have set up their stalls, some owned by French expatriates, others identifying with the French theme. Well-dressed Australians have flocked to the venue, bringing their French bulldogs and poodles with scarves, and swan about with champagne flutes, enjoying the cancan and masterclasses on *les arts de la table*, taking Instagram photos in striped shirts and berets, and playing at being French with a touch of irony.

The French nationals too—my husband included—are playing at being French, complete with oversized berets. It's an occasion where self-stereotyping and other-stereotyping meet but don't coincide, with the French queuing for *cassoulet* rather than crêpes, and nostalgically attracted to supermarket items like Amora mustard, Prince biscuits, Carambars and Orangina rather than snails and truffle oil.

For both groups it's an opportunity for self-mythologisation, a brief detour into a mythical French life, easy to sustain for a weekend, a day, an hour, especially from a distance. And beyond the festival, a Facebook 'like' is a further opportunity for Australians to project themselves into

an imaginary space of style and beauty represented as French, identify as Francophile, and express an emotional connection to this position, half a world away from the pragmatic realities of life in France.

I am not immune to the role-play and identifications, and the discourses of self-invention are not alien to academics travelling to France. I recognise my own trajectory too—leaving for Paris to study literary theory some 30 years ago—as a French makeover, albeit one more focused on the intellectual fashions of the day than sartorial ones. Living in France represents cultural capital in all these cases, but the form of the capital is not constant, ranging from food to fashion to feminist theory, from an art of living to a literary lexicon and a lingua franca. And the variations form distinct demographic patterns.

What then is at stake in the Australian fascination with all things French? France's attractions as a travel destination are not uniformly perceived across the globe, and the antipodean vision of France is refracted through the lens of gender. In the Australian memoirs of life in France, France is framed as an imaginary space of otherness where a new improved self beckons, particularly in the women's memoirs. As readers, in our armchair travel to France, as consumers of French festivals, wine and home goods, we too are invited to participate. We may, on reflection, decline the invitation to identify with an idealised 'French' self, or redefine it, but we are continually summoned to consider it.

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