

# 5

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

We saw in Chapter 3 the ease and rapidity with which some of the memoirists claimed a sense of belonging in France, identifying with France to the point of desiring to be French, at least partially. And in Chapter 4 we saw among the women in particular how the love affair with France led to a flirtation with French identity, with France magically transforming one's life into a 'French life'. But what precisely is French about this French life and French identity? What does Frenchness entail in this context? Indeed, what does France have to do with this construction of Frenchness? Let us start by examining Vicki Archer's memoirs, which present perhaps the most fulsome expression of what is meant, in this genre, by a French life.

### **Vicki Archer: *My French Life***

Somewhat surprisingly, given the cover photo of a woman approaching the entrance to a Paris metro station, *My French Life* (2006) tells the story of falling in love with and buying a rural property—Mas de Bérard—in Provence, renovating the seventeenth-century farmhouse, reviving its apple and pear orchards, and planting 2,000 olive trees. As the title suggests, Archer's focus is on constructing a French life for herself, which is seen as a step towards *being* French, at least to some extent, as shown when she reflects on her own experience and asks: 'What is it that is so alluring about France? Why do so many people attempt to grasp the life and, in their way become just a little bit French?' (208).

Archer's French life—both the book and the life it purports to represent—is a work of art. From the stones to the soft furnishings, from the boutiques to the bathroom, from market visits to mealtimes, the various aspects of place and pastime are lovingly described and exquisitely photographed. The olive groves are 'a giant canvas, forever changing'; the olive trees are 'my living sculptures' (178). We see manicured gardens, artfully arranged rooms and furniture, embroidered linen sheets, and elegant table settings. Home, book and life are all aesthetic masterpieces. Indeed Archer's 2009 sequel, *French Essence*, was on sale in 2010 in the National Gallery of Australia in conjunction with 'Masterpieces from France', a prestigious exhibition of post-impressionist paintings. *My French Life* thus presents the full mythic view of France as the leader in style, food and pleasure, and the life Archer has created for herself in France is presented as nostalgic perfection.

Striking throughout the book is the emphasis on the care, effort and investment of time required to achieve this work of art. This is especially the case in the early chapters recounting Archer's purchase, the renovation, the linguistic hurdles and the difficulties of acculturation. Here we see the craftsmanship involved in creating Archer's French life, not only the skills of 'the teams of people who worked on the house' (2006, 35) and the dedication of her cook 'taking two days to prepare her tomatoes or hours to roll pastry' (134), but more particularly the commitment and artistry of Archer herself. Archer writes of the 'hours spent experimenting [...] to find exactly the right shade and texture for the interior walls' (48), her 'obsession with perfectly mown avenues of grass between the rows of olives' (178), the fact that styling success is 'never by accident' but the result of careful choices (68). The house, the olive groves, everyday life and Archer's appearance are all carefully tended to form her French life. Unlike a museum piece, however, Archer's masterpiece is never definitively achieved, for every aspect requires ongoing care and monitoring. There is the farmhouse and its surrounds: 'Like small children, our olives require nurture, love and constant supervision' (20); 'Mas de Bérard will probably never be finished. I like to think of it as more of a work in progress' (56). And the care extends to the preparation of meals ('The long minutes to hull the tiniest of wild berries', 134) and to the body ('French women know that the time spent in the preparation of beauty is not to be undervalued', 73; 'Style takes time' 200).

*My French Life* proposes a model existence, raising everyday life to an art form, and it provides the tools for other women to follow suit. In addition to the photos of interiors there is a chapter on '*les femmes*', which coaches a feminine French self, giving tips on putting outfits together and emulating French style (68–73). Then there are two appendices: 'my french address book' (220–24) consisting of five pages of restaurants and boutiques; and 'my french inspiration' (225–28), a list of films, music and books to shape one's mind. Together, these provide instruction in fashioning a French life of one's own. There is one aspect of Archer's life, however, where 'how-to' information is scarce, and that is acquiring the financial means to purchase and renovate the property, to employ the team of artisans who worked on it, and to engage a manager and a cook to maintain it year-round while she maintains a home base in London.

For curiosity's sake, despite the perfection of her French life, Archer need spend only part of the year in France in order to achieve it. On purchasing Mas de Bérard, she feels that moving from Sydney to Provence would cause too much disruption to her husband's work and her children's schooling. The family decides to move to London instead, where the conventions of business and education more closely resemble Australian norms. This allows Archer to 'commute' to Provence to oversee the restoration of the property (11). Archer's French life is thus not the full cultural immersion experience. When she writes that the decision to buy 'opened the door to another life, my French life' (216), we can interpret 'another' in the sense of an *additional* life rather than a fundamental transformation of her previous life. The move to London enables her to maintain an Anglo life alongside her French life. In fact, Archer's French life is only one of three:

When I am asked the question, 'Where do you live?' I can only respond that there is no single answer. The truth is that I feel I have three lives. I live a split life between where I was born and raised, where is feasible for my family and where my heart truly lies. (3)

Rather than being torn between cultures, Archer acquires lives. Her French life is a designer accessory to her Anglo existence. Indeed, it is possible that its part-time nature allows Archer to live it in a purer form, uncontaminated by the usual stresses, the messiness of ongoing everyday life. The farmhouse is the setting for summer holidays that afford 'rare moments with our children, away from the distraction of the city and the pressures of school and university life' (173). Her French life is thus timeout from her London life, and there is no compulsion to reconcile the two.

A weekend in Paris suffices as a pretext for a chapter on the capital, devoted to visits to choice addresses in Paris (99–129). Here too, perfection reigns, commodified in exclusive cafés and boutiques. In Archer's French life, even the metro smells delicious thanks to a nearby *boulangerie* (101). But this Parisian existence is not a fourth life to add to the other three. Slow-paced days in Provence are seamlessly combined with bustling weekends in Paris in a single French life combining rural and urban delights.

The fact that there is ongoing work on interior decorating, landscaping and beauty, but not ongoing residence in France, or cultural or linguistic immersion, raises questions about the Frenchness of Archer's life. Her 'French life' is not one that is available to many French people, and not a life that includes work or school, those everyday activities that occupy a large proportion of most French families' lives. This leads us back to the question driving this book: what's France got to do with it? In Archer's case, the primary function of France appears to be to provide an attractive setting for a particular kind of renovation of self and surrounds. In other words, it quite literally assumes a background role, while beauty, domestic luxury and self-discipline are foregrounded.

If France does not necessarily have a great deal to do with the shape and crafting of this life, how then might it be characterised? Let us put aside the memoirs for a moment and consider where else these kinds of reinventions of the self can be found, and the discourses associated with them.

## Postfeminist discourses

A number of the elements identified in Archer's memoir echo themes associated with postfeminist discourses. Postfeminism can be understood as a return to earlier, traditionally feminine ideals and pastimes, with the difference that the achievements of feminism are taken for granted. Thus, a lifestyle focused on creating the perfect home, preparing exquisite meals, and pursuing beauty, while overlooking the economic and social freedoms that have made it possible, can be characterised as postfeminist.

Although the term 'postfeminism' was originally coined to designate a repudiation of feminism or a backlash against it, the current of thought has evolved in complex ways and incorporates the assumption that feminism has outlived its usefulness (McRobbie 2007). Following

McRobbie, Diane Negra, in *What a Girl Wants? Fantasizing the Reclamation of Self in Postfeminism* (2009), and Susan Douglas, in *Enlightened Sexism: The Seductive Message That Feminism's Work is Done* (2010), explain that postfeminism rests on the idea that feminism's success in achieving equality has obviated any further need for it. A postfeminist outlook can thus be distinguished by the way it takes feminist gains—women's economic independence, legal equality and social rights—for granted in the pursuit of a prefeminist lifestyle (Tasker and Negra 2007; Negra 2009). In other words, postfeminism is underpinned by a tension between acceptance of and resistance to feminism. Rosalind Gill notes the entanglement of feminist and antifeminist discourses in 'Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of a Sensibility', such that 'Feminist ideas are both articulated and repudiated, expressed and disavowed' (2007, 163). Rather than defining postfeminism in terms of an epistemological break with feminism, Gill characterises it as a 'distinctive sensibility' (147) recognised through the evocation of interrelated themes:

These include the notion that femininity is a bodily property; the shift from objectification to subjectification; the emphasis upon self-surveillance, monitoring and discipline; a focus upon individualism, choice and empowerment; the dominance of a makeover paradigm; a resurgence in ideas of natural sexual difference; a marked sexualisation of culture; and an emphasis upon consumerism and the commodification of difference. (149)

Archer's *My French Life* ticks every box on Gill's checklist of postfeminist themes, except perhaps for the overt sexualisation of culture, although the yearning for the farmhouse is eroticised. Subjectification is evident in the self-presentation of the author as an active desiring subject who changes her life radically in order to pursue her passion. The chapter on '*les femmes*' is devoted to the body: from skin and lips on the first page (63) through dress, hair, posture, style, make-up, before closing with an account of 'female preparations' (78) for a wedding. It simultaneously naturalises physical beauty as the domain of women, and emphasises the self-monitoring necessary to maintain and enhance it. The disciplined approach to beauty extends beyond the body to daily practices and to the house and the olive grove, resulting in parallel makeovers of the self and of the property. And Archer celebrates individual choices as determining the direction of her life, choices primarily expressed as consumer purchases. Although ostensibly about the creation of a French life, Archer's book looks remarkably like postfeminist life writing.

Let us linger further on the ways in which some of these themes are embraced and connected with each other, firstly choice and consumerism, and secondly discipline and the makeover paradigm.

## **Choice and consumerism**

Archer exudes a sense of entitlement in embracing a lifestyle that is beyond the financial reach of most people. She describes her decision to devote herself to creating an exquisite home in Provence simply as a matter of choice: 'Choosing where we live says much about the way we want to live our lives and the things that interest us' (2009, 152). She sees the world as being made up of autonomous individuals with economic freedom who are equally able to enact personal preferences. Rosalind Gill draws attention to the neoliberal nature of the postfeminist worldview, whereby a life of domestic luxury is seen simply as a matter of individual decision-making and purchasing power:

The notion that all our practices are freely chosen is central to postfeminist discourses which present women as autonomous agents no longer constrained by any inequalities or power imbalances whatsoever. (2007, 153)

This is echoed by Tasker and Negra in their overview of postfeminism:

Anchored in consumption as a strategy and leisure as a site for the production of the self, postfeminist mass media assumes that the pleasures and lifestyles with which it is associated are somehow universally shared and, perhaps more significantly, universally accessible. (2007, back cover)

Archer embodies postfeminism's 'empowered consumer' (Tasker and Negra 2007, 2) in blithely assuming that her 'choices'—'I now divide my year between France and England, with several visits to Australia thrown in' (2006, 14)—are available to all. Discriminating purchases are viewed as necessities in a life unconstrained by budgetary concerns:

I only buy what I must have and what I cannot forget; I trust my eye and follow my instinct [...] I am not practical by nature and I believe that if I cannot live without an object then it cannot live without me. (Archer 2009, 30)

But Archer is not alone in this; the sense of entitlement and the emphasis on a life chosen freely are themes reappearing regularly through the recent Australian memoirs of life in France. Marisa Raoul, author of *Ma Folie Française*, feels in control of her destiny and able to please herself:

How can all these crazy, wonderful things be happening to me? The simple answer is, I've chosen them. I have exactly what I deserve and what I have wished for. My life is as joyous or as mundane as I allow it to be. (2008, 180)

Likewise consumption is a recurrent theme: Ellie Nielsen, although with rather more irony than Archer (see Chapter 8), exemplifies the attitude of 'unfettered material entitlement' identified as postfeminist (Tasker and Negra 2007, 16) when she decides she can buy herself a 'piece of Paris' in the form of an apartment, and with it a French life (Nielsen 2007, 2). Like Archer, Nielsen is a woman of means who can invest time, energy and finances into tasteful homemaking. The consumer fantasy is particularly focused on the details of domestic life:

a Paris chequebook is a licence to buy anything. [...] My chequebook and I are going to be making all those small, crucial, everyday decisions that make up real Parisian life. That perfect lamp. Those wine glasses. A snowy pair of white cotton pillow cases. (171)

Nielsen's 'real Parisian life' is a life of luxury domesticity, idealised femininity and retail pleasures—in other words, the postfeminist version of a life revolving around home, beauty and shopping.

The combination of affluence and nostalgia for a life of domestic activities reaches its apogee in *French Ties*, another sumptuous coffee-table book, in which Jane Webster recounts her life in a five-storey château she has purchased in a village in Normandy. Her purchase places her amongst the local élite:

At Château de Bosgouet, we live amongst many families descended from French nobility—some have lived in their châteaux for generations—and they are the nicest, most down-to-earth people you could ever hope to meet. (2012, 170)

In Bosgouet she offers culinary-focused vacations providing 'an authentic experience of life in a French château' (xxiii). Readers who sign up for her tours can thus join a rarefied social class, at least temporarily, and simultaneously enhance their domestic accomplishments, experiencing

a curious blend of upstairs and downstairs roles. Webster herself delights in what might otherwise be regarded as household chores: in the château, waxing the floors, dusting and polishing, and cleaning the copper pots become pleasurable aesthetic rituals (45) with no mention of housemaid's knee:

One of my first jobs is to oil and wax the floors until they shine; as I do, the wonderful aromas of linseed and beeswax permeate the house. [...] I use lavender essential oil on my dusting and polishing rags; [...] Once I've polished the floors, filled the house with roses from the Rouen market and made the beds up with crisp linen, Bosgouet begins to hum again. Although it's time-consuming, I love this annual opening-up routine.

Another job that I must do every summer when we arrive in France is clean my copper pots. I'm not obsessive about the pots [...] but I do like to see them shine. (45)

Webster embraces the role of homemaker wholeheartedly: 'Fortunately, keeping house is one of the things I love most!' (42). In an interesting twist on the fairytale, Cinderella buys her own castle, but still scrubs and cleans; it is the chores themselves that now sparkle with fairy dust.

There are close parallels between Archer's 'French life' and that of Webster in *French Ties*. Much of what Webster identifies as characteristic of French life is linked to a leisurely pace, 'a slower, more rooted way of life' (77, cf. 90), but once again, it appears that the French life is not feasible on a full-time basis. Webster spends only half the year in France, with secondary schooling for example relegated to Australia. And she describes the juggling act of living between two countries: hectic planning, writing lists, monitoring airfares, and Skype calls to the older children in boarding school in Melbourne (xiv). France is thus a place for timeout but not for the children's education or year-round daily life, and the simplicity, slow pace and 'rooted' nature of Webster's old-world French life are only made possible through technology, complexity, frenzy and repeated uprooting elsewhere. Webster has succeeded in creating for herself a (part-time) life of 'simple pleasures' (71)—'taking the time to admire and enjoy the simple beauty of life' (77), 'the simple act of making a loaf of bread' (90)—through a purchase that represents the antithesis of the simple life: a château on the other side of the world.

The result of economic privilege and careful consumer choices, the lives narrated by both Archer and Webster are more easily recognisable as postfeminist nostalgia than as French.

## Discipline and the makeover paradigm

Like Rosalind Gill (2008), Tasker and Negra (2007, 10) remark on the prominence of the makeover paradigm in postfeminist media culture, which promotes the idea that self-transformation is the path to fulfilment. And the 'emphasis upon self-surveillance, monitoring and discipline' identified by Gill (2008, 441) is the means by which this transformation takes place. The terms Gill uses allude quite clearly to Michel Foucault's work. As we have seen, Archer's makeover of home and self is the result of sustained effort. Indeed Archer's disciplined olive grove, the disciplined body, the constant attention required to conform to the idealised French life, can be understood in terms of what Michel Foucault termed 'technologies of the self':

which permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality. (Foucault 1988, 18).

This undertaking 'implies certain modes of training and modification of individuals, not only in the obvious sense of acquiring certain skills but also in the sense of acquiring certain attitudes' (18). Foucault considers confession and self-monitoring as technologies of the self, and Archer's book brings both of these to bear, constituting a 'French' self both through the confessional practice of autobiography and through the self-observation entailed in framing her life to be photographed and read. Furthermore, through the didactic mission of the lifestyle book, through the tips on how to look and be more French, *My French Life* participates in turn in an ongoing project of training other disciplined selves among its readers. Indeed the neat fit between the self-discipline envisaged by the authors and the production of willing consumers participating in the global economy illustrates Foucault's concept of governmentality on a supra-national scale (Foucault 1988, 19).

The makeover—the 'self as project' (Tasker and Negra 2007, 21)—is a conspicuous theme throughout the memoirs of Australians in France, and the technologies of confession and self-monitoring are similarly evident

across the corpus. The memoirs abound in stories of efforts and tips on methods to look more 'French': where to shop, how to dress, whether or not to smile. These tend to require a 'self-policing narcissistic gaze' (Gill 2007, 151) that is nonetheless represented in terms of a discourse of pleasing oneself. Jane Webster in *French Ties* articulates an idealised vision of femininity, combining style, grace and charm with shopping in her portrait of the archetypal Frenchwoman pursuing pleasure:

She glides through the market almost ethereally. Her basket never seems to weigh her down or make her stoop, and she pauses to smell the freshly cut roses for the pure pleasure it adds to her day. [...] There's not a wrinkle in her perfectly pressed shirt or any sign of pilling on the soft cashmere jumper knotted around her shoulders. (2012, 173)

A number of the authors aspire to conform to such an image, and are prepared to go to considerable lengths to achieve it. While appearance is a particular locus of aesthetic effort and discipline, it is only the outward sign of a more thoroughgoing transformation. Renovation of the self, although realised in individual ways in the corpus, is invariably described as creating a beautiful and/or better life. The memoirs of Sally Asher, Lucinda Holdforth and Janelle McCulloch are cases in point. Although their metamorphoses do not coincide, each recounts a disciplined postfeminist makeover.

### Sally Asher: *Losing It in France*

Sally Asher's *Losing It in France: Les Secrets of the French Diet* exemplifies a makeover memoir in which discipline is paradoxically couched as self-gratification and indulgence (cf. Gill 2007, 441). Asher exhorts her readers to lose weight as she did in Paris through a whole-of-life approach that requires 'patience, focus and perseverance' (2011, 82), along with 'calmness, determination, resilience, optimism and emotional energy' (114) in training mind and body together. The key is to 'develop strategies of mindfully checking in with your emotions, so you can pay careful attention to what your body needs and wants at any given moment' (113), 'to remain attuned and responsive' (140) to mind and body at all times. This intense self-surveillance requires constant vigilance; it is not, however, seen as punitive in any way. On the contrary, the training is characterised as a discipline of enjoyment: one must conscientiously 'pursue pleasure each day' (158). Asher focuses on 'spoiling [her]self thin' (10) by learning to savour mouth-watering delicacies: 'in France, I learned to get more

joy and satisfaction from a small piece of rich, dark chocolate than I ever got from an entire family block before' (56). Pleasure is here the result of diligent application, a regime of 'self-nurturing' (156), whereby 'you are sending a message to yourself that you are worth the extra effort' (58). Relaxation is something we need to 'practise' (96) in order to 'master the art of intuitive self-care' (11). As in Archer's memoir, way of life is elevated to an aesthetic form. But more than this, 'creating a beautiful life so that every day you feel nurtured' (152) becomes a duty: 'It is not selfish to take care of yourself—it's one of the most important things you can do for yourself and your family' (175).

How French, then, is this life, we may ask? Sally Asher is quite candid about the role of France in the makeover she advocates. Although France was the source and setting of her own transformation and features in the title of her book, and although on the back cover we are told to 'do as the French do', there is no need for others to travel there:

You don't have to speak French, or even go to France, to do what I did because [...] you can adapt [the French way of life] to any geographical environment. (10)

You don't have to go to France [...] You can begin the exciting changes wherever you are, because it starts from the inside, with your heart and mind. (215)

A postfeminist combination of beauty and duty, the new self may be French-inspired, but France itself is redundant in its realisation.

### Lucinda Holdforth: *True Pleasures*

While Asher's memoir participates in the self-help genre, Lucinda Holdforth's *True Pleasures: A Memoir of Women in Paris* (2004) is more of an intellectual memoir, concluding with a reading list of biographies and histories rather than a Paris address book for those who wish to follow her journey. It nonetheless parallels Asher's book in telling the story of producing a new and more beautiful life for oneself through a discipline of pleasure. And like the transformation Asher espouses, Holdforth's does not require prolonged residence or cultural immersion in France: Holdforth manages to refashion her life through a three-week trip to Paris staying with an Australian expatriate friend. She even explicitly rejects the idea that she might want to establish herself in France (75). Thus, although her new life is very clearly modelled on French ones, it will not be lived in France, but is destined for use back in Australia.

For Holdforth, the idea of womanhood is foremost in the reshaping of her life, as the question prompting her trip to Paris demonstrates:

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?* (158, original italics)

Dissatisfied with her Australian existence, she turns to the biographies of illustrious women who spent time in Paris for models: Colette, Nancy Mitford and Edith Wharton among others, writers who 'had always had something to say to me about being a woman, about crafting a beautiful life' (6). Her predecessors are not necessarily French, but all made Paris their home, and Holdforth feels the need to follow literally in the footsteps of these women, seeking a connection to this community through a connection with place.

Like Archer, Holdforth promotes the idea of a life as a masterpiece, but her aesthetic is all-encompassing rather than predominantly visual—it concerns the shape of one's life:

the women of Paris [...] came to represent important things to me: the grand scale that an individual life can achieve; the beautiful arc that a finished life can describe; the radiant, limitless scope of female potentiality. (7)

Through her reading of books by and about these women, and through visiting the parts of the city they occupied, she comes to see Paris as a space where one can 'craft' one's life (6), 'free' (12), 'reinvent' (12), 'define' (13), 'recharge' (21) and 'create' (21, 95) oneself as a woman, and this will be her mission too in the city, to transform her old life into a new and more radiant one. Holdforth explicitly participates in the discourse of the autonomous self who plots the course of her life: 'We can *make* ourselves. We can decide. *I* can decide' (159). The tension characteristic of postfeminism, however, is apparent throughout the book: the apparently feminist discourse of individual empowerment accompanies a nostalgic quest for a 'French' version of femininity.

In the famous lives of the past that she studies, Holdforth seeks alternatives to the expressions of gender and gender relations available to her in Australia. Holdforth identifies French femininity—comprising wit, passion and elegance in equal parts—as a potential and potent element of her new self. And once again, we find that discipline is the key to achieving it. She explains the effort involved where appearance is concerned:

Paris is not a relaxed city. Standards are high. It is not that French women are glamorous; in fact, they tend to be understated in appearance. Their clothes are conservative. Heels are not usually high. They are exceptionally well groomed, but in a subtle way. It looks effortless, but of course it isn't. And it's damned hard to copy. (50)

Difficult it may be, but Holdforth schools herself in techniques for attaining understated elegance. A manicure is a lesson in French aesthetics:

The effect is one of heightened reality: Everything looks natural, only much better, natural in a way that poor old nature could never hope to achieve. Somehow this seems to me very French. (133)

Frenchness is here characterised as a contrived naturalness, a general improvement—natural, only better—rather than a specific cultural form. Equally, effort is required in the realm of conversation, where Holdforth seeks to be 'swift and subtle [...] lucid and unflinching' (29), like her forbears who could hold their own in the salons of yesteryear. Even her 'lazy Australian mouth' needs to be trained, indeed 'energise[d] [...] to perform the acrobatics of French vowels and diphthongs' (2). In all its aspects, the French life to which Holdforth aspires is the antithesis of a 'sloppy and self-indulgent' one (29).

Through her endeavours, Holdforth seeks to emulate what she sees as the maturity (169) of French femininity, which appears 'complex and interesting' (51), rather than 'girly' (51)—the Australian mode that never suited her. Her reflections amount to a rejection of Australian gender norms where, in her view, sexual difference has been somewhat erased, where women 'missed our chance to be the decorative sex' (140) and female politicians largely mirror their male counterparts (179), and where 'stimulating and equal conversation between men and women' is undervalued and largely absent, even in supposedly progressive circles (82). She sees France as shaped by a history in which 'men and women *mixed* in all circumstances of life' (82) and women were considered fundamental to civilisation (168) without sacrificing charm, refinement or the pursuit of their desires. This history provides a model for revising the gender scripts available to her.

In Paris, then, Holdforth reinvents herself as a woman in the style of her historical models, undergoing a paradoxically backward-looking 'revolution' that will direct 'the future course of her existence' (221), lending grace and purpose (220) to her hitherto messy life. And Paris

is the place where this is possible, even if one stays only three weeks. But while Paris is characterised by pleasure, it is not a space for leisure but for applying oneself to the art of living. Although Paris is where women are 'free to *be* themselves. Free even to *reinvent* themselves' (12), this does not mean that they are free to take it easy. Freedom here is the freedom to strive for an ideal femininity combining poise and intelligence.

### Janelle McCulloch: *La Vie Parisienne*

Janelle McCulloch's *La Vie Parisienne: Looking for Love—and the Perfect Lingerie* (2008) records her six-month sojourn in Paris and her hopes to return. Like Archer, she lures the reader with the promise of a love story on the cover and, again, the romance is with a place rather than a person—this time Paris (2008, 27). Paris functions metonymically: the desire for Paris is in fact a desire for a particular art of living. And like Archer, McCulloch presents an airbrushed version of her life in perfect Paris:

When I've finished gazing at perfect pastries I'll wander through lively streetscapes to the rue de Buci street market near St-Germandes Prés, an atmosphere-laden neighbourhood on the Left Bank that fulfils just about every fantasy you ever had about being in Paris. (10)

This is my life in Paris, my Parisian life—or *la vie Parisienne*, as the locals say. And it's what I'd always imagined it to be. An education in style, glamour, gastronomy and grace in a place where even the asparagus spears are exquisite. (11)

However, unlike Archer where the mythical image is maintained throughout her account, McCulloch shifts between two voices in her narration. The panegyric to Paris is undercut by a mocking voice that measures the shortcomings of her apartment, her wardrobe, her love life, her digestive system, her self: 'I could feel my fantasies of an *Amélie*-style romance among the cobblestones of the Left Bank rapidly receding behind the reassuringly high pile of white French toilet paper' (51). This humorous, self-deprecating voice exposes her self-doubt and measures the gap between expectation and experience: 'I can't help but adore this place. It is everything that I'm not, but hope to be' (11). The two voices are aligned with different cultural selves: one mockingly described as 'faux French' (50); the other Australian. McCulloch constantly oscillates between them, maintaining an ironic distance between the two positions. McCulloch's aspiration is to 'be French' (189) or at least to 'become just a tiny bit more Parisian' (57), but the irony exposes this French identity

as 'performative' to use Judith Butler's term: it is 'a normative ideal rather than a descriptive feature of experience' (Butler 1990, 16–17). McCulloch knows she is spinning a fantasy but wants to believe in it all the same: 'You see, the truth is, we all secretly want the fantasy' (27).

The construction of McCulloch's new life, her *vie parisienne*, is painstaking and starts with 'pencil[ing] out a strategy' that will enable her to 'establish [...] a life in Paris. A part-time life at first, but hopefully a full-time one before I turn [...] too old to enjoy high heels' (37). Then, 'through increasingly extended periods in Paris, I mapped out a new life: one that was as different to my Australian one as stilettos are to thongs' (38). Once again, the new life is feminised and is a product of careful planning and training. McCulloch outlines a variety of technologies of the self to achieve it. Being Parisian is achieved first through leisurely daily routines in picturesque places: writing, walking, lingering in cafés (38)—a far cry from the *métro, boulot, dodo* (metro, work, sleep) by which many Parisians describe their existence. Once again daily life is elevated to an art form, in an existence that McCulloch hopes will enable her to become more Parisian. The second requirement of *la vie parisienne* is glamour and style:

I've come to Paris to be glamorous. Or at least to be educated in the art of glamour. And now my wardrobe is telling me, in no uncertain terms, that *ce n'est pas possible*. (93)

This will take more work, but McCulloch decides to adopt strategies she identifies among French women (dieting, coffee, hundreds of stairs) before finally determining that the best strategy for glamour is a combination of bluff and self-respect (113).

But disciplining the self goes beyond appearance to learning how to *be* in a new way. McCulloch starts by making a list of 'Things To Do In Paris', which will help her with 'The Getting Of (Parisian) Wisdom' (56):

Most people come to Paris to climb the Eiffel Tower, wander around the Left Bank, fall in love, find themselves, lose themselves, or just be someone *other* than themselves for a little while. I come to Paris to do all this but also to try to be a better person—a wiser, kinder, more sensitive, less stressed, and generally more peaceful person. With a lot more style. Like Audrey Hepburn. Only without the gorgeous face and body, obviously. (56)

Acquiring a Parisian identity is subsumed into a more general program of self-improvement: 'to try to be a better person'. Cultural specificity is, however, not ignored entirely. Googling, she 'stumble[s] over a website with odd instructions on *être*—how to "be" when you live in France' (134). The site highlights the art of telling people off (*engueuler*, 133–34), and McCulloch adds this to the list of 'social codes' (133) that she is struggling to learn in Paris, which include not smiling at strangers (111), and not replying in the affirmative (133).

In her chapter on 'L'Art de Vivre', McCulloch comments that 'Lifestyle design is a huge trend at the moment. Huge. We are being designed to within an inch of our lives' (152). Although she is referring to interior design, the remark casts light on her own approach to shaping her new life—yet she distances herself from it:

Part of me feels compelled to understand this aspect of Parisian living [...] and part of me is alarmed at how seriously they take it all [...] These people are so gravely determined to create stylish lives. (157)

Although creating a stylish life is explicitly McCulloch's project, the part of her expressed through the ironic voice finds the self-discipline difficult to maintain and doubts emerge:

when you work so hard to be someone else, do you eventually forget who you really are? [...] The trouble with being in another city and wanting to reinvent yourself is that sometimes the old you still shows through, muddying the grand plan. (112)

The old self shows through in that second, more Australian voice. And although at first she claims that her heart belongs in Paris—'I may still be an outsider in France but my heart will always belong to Paris' (38)—by the middle of the book she realises that her heart is difficult to shift: 'I fear that I am, and will always be at heart, an Australian girl from the country' (112) and certainly she continues to use the first person 'we' to refer to Australians (134), never Parisians.

Unlike the other cases studied in this chapter, McCulloch's disciplined postfeminist makeover is only partially successful. A mocking down-to-earth voice—identified as Australian—is heard throughout the narrative, pointing out the pitfalls. Paris is not perfect after all: McCulloch laments the difficulty of belonging, her social isolation in Paris (220–24), her empty love life (227). Ultimately she sees that Paris has wrought positive

changes in herself; however, her French self is not characterised by glamour or romance or a French social circle as she originally hoped, but by self-improvement of a more general kind: acceptance of her shortcomings and a more leisurely life of small daily pleasures (233).

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

It is interesting to compare the emphasis on self-care and training in the Australian memoirs of life in France with other versions of what constitutes a French life. The discourse of self-discipline, the voluntary acceptance of new constraints by the authors contrasts directly with the tales told by an earlier generation of British travellers to the Mediterranean, of whom Peter Mayle is the most obvious example. For more than a century the 'Sunny South' has been a space of 'escape from the physical, mechanical and spiritual constraints of British modern life', a site of 'moral, intellectual, and sexual' liberation (Moyà Antón 2013, 39), a place to relax, unwind and let go. But whereas other Anglophones may be seeking warmth and abandon in France, for these twenty-first-century Australian women, France is a site of self-regimentation rather than relaxation, and they are unlikely to be impressed by the amount of sunshine. In a conspicuous break from the Peter Mayle template for writing of life in France, whereby the industrious Englishman gradually relaxes and succumbs to a slower tempo, the Australian women catalogue effort and achievement in the careful crafting of self and surrounds.

The contrast between the two constructions of Frenchness is revealing. Asking which vision is more authentic is entirely unhelpful, of course; each is a projection of an 'other', a heterotopia—a geographically localisable yet unreal space where workaday life is suspended and contested (Foucault 1986). But the representation of France in the women's memoirs is distinctive in resembling what Mary Louise Pratt identifies as 'feminotopias' in travel writing: 'episodes that present idealised worlds of female autonomy, empowerment, and pleasure' (2008, 161).<sup>1</sup> If, as we saw in Chapter 4, France is viewed by the memoirists as a fantasyland of self-transformation, it is clear that the transformation involved is

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1 It also echoes Betsy Wearing's reading of leisure spaces as Foucauldian heterotopias: spaces for women to 'reconstitute[e] the self and rewrite[e] the script of identity' (1998, 146).

of a particular kind: a strongly gendered makeover whereby a beautiful life is achieved through care of body and home, luxury consumer choices and following one's passions however extravagant. In these ways, Australian women create a supposedly 'French' life: a cultural performance of a new improved self, a work of art. It is a particularly feminine project: there are no examples in the corpus of men seeking to be French or to conform to a French ideal of masculinity. On the contrary, Bryce Corbett, for example, is scathing in his descriptions of French men (2007, 66, 237, see Chapter 10).

The practices detailed by the authors of the memoirs, although associated with 'Frenchness', are not particularly wedded to France, and—as Sally Asher reminds us—do not even need to take place in France. They do not require proficiency in French language, full-time or lengthy residence in France, or a French social circle. Rather, a 'French' life is achieved through the disciplined pursuit of style and elegance, middle-class tastes and means, and a neoliberal sense of autonomy, a list that reads as a catalogue of postfeminist themes and values. What's France got to do with it? Not a lot, but it functions as a shortcut signifier for postfeminist ideals. This in turn helps to answer the question posed in the previous chapter—'what's love got to do with it?'—for Angela McRobbie (2007) notes that a postfeminist worldview sees romance as both the goal of and reward for aesthetic efforts. And if romance—rather than, say, professional achievement—is the yardstick by which a postfeminist life is measured, then as we saw in Chapter 4 the memoirs deliver it, with or without a Frenchman. The reward for beauty and self-pampering is figured as romance, as highlighted in soft focus on the covers.

Now the romance and the shopping, the feminine pastimes and rewards in the memoirs could be seen simply as evidence of the strength and spread of postfeminist ideals. After all, it is not difficult to identify external pressures (in the form of media discourses, for example) to conform to this image of glamour, refinement and consumption, although these pressures appear to be fully internalised in many of the memoirs such that the author is seen to be taking control of her own destiny in embarking on the project of self-transformation. However, as the authors tell it, these activities are particularly able to deliver a new, improved self when they take place in France. In detailing the numerous ways in which the memoirs conform to postfeminist discourses, I wish to argue that France is configured as a particularly propitious site for Australian women to embody the postfeminist dream. For the success of the branding of

France as world leader in fashion, style and luxury goods (DeJean 2005) corresponds perfectly to postfeminist desires. Largely ignored by the male authors, this construction of France appears insistently in the Australian women's memoirs. Indeed, France's ability to epitomise postfeminist ideals of elegance, romance and luxury domesticity is such that even those women who explicitly reject those ideals feel compelled to rehearse them in some way in their memoirs, as we shall see.

It would, however, be an oversimplification to suggest that all these books simply tell the same story. Archer's may be the most full-blown expression of France's enablement of postfeminist ideals, but the same dynamics play out in other memoirs through slightly different performative frameworks, as we have already seen in McCulloch's irony. There seems to be a catalogue of themes that cannot be avoided when Australian women recount life in France. The fairytale can, however, be challenged, and can also be diverted to particular purposes. The following chapters trace these challenges and diversions.

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