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What's class got to do with it (and demographics more generally)?

Postfeminism is defined by class, age, and racial exclusions; it is youth-obsessed and white and middle-class by default. (Tasker and Negra 2007)

In seeking to understand what underlies the profusion and popularity of the memoirs of Australians in France, we have identified postfeminist discourses as a particularly strong current. Not all the authors, however, are swept up in the enthusiasm for the ideals of style, romance and self that are supposedly represented by France. This chapter identifies instances of resistance to this current, obstacles around which it eddies, crosscurrents and blockages, while subsequent chapters trace more subtle diversions of the discourse to other purposes.

When we compare the memoirs that ventriloquise the postfeminist fantasy and those that avoid it, or indeed challenge or subvert it, we find a difference in the demographic profile of their authors. Working-class origins appear to offer some immunity to the siren call of postfeminist Paris, hence the chapter title 'What's class got to do with it?', but we shall see that other demographic factors are also in play.

Tasker and Negra have identified 'class, age, and racial exclusions' in postfeminist thought, characterising it as 'youth-obsessed and white and middle-class by default' (2007, back cover), and Jess Butler adds 'heterosexual' to the traits of privileged subjects (2013, 35). These

exclusions are useful in understanding patterns and divisions within the corpus, for the postfeminist ideal of French life is most obviously questioned in the memoirs of older women and those who recount their working-class origins, while there is a conspicuous absence of gay-themed memoirs or memoirs by non-Anglo-Australian authors in the corpus.

Class

As noted in Chapter 2, the vast majority of the Australian-in-France memoirists are from middle-class families. A few, however—Sheryle Bagwell, Barbara Biggs, John Baxter and Patti Miller—stand out from the rest in emphasising their working-class roots, which seem to insulate them to some extent from the fantasy version of French life. The positions taken by Bagwell and Biggs are particularly revealing of class positioning, as they explicitly reject the kinds of identifications seen in the previous chapters.

Sheryle Bagwell: *My French Connection*

Journalist Sheryle Bagwell in *My French Connection* (2006) firmly distances herself from the dream of France from the first pages of the memoir. She describes herself as ‘a girl from the western suburbs’ of Sydney (7), who, at the time of first sojourn in France, knew little of the country and was neither enamoured of French culture nor captivated by its mystique:

When I was offered the chance to spend a year in France, I simply saw it as a way of being somewhere else for a while. I'd just wanted to get away from Australia. It didn't really matter where. Paris was as good a place as any. (1)

She refuses to identify as a Francophile, and rejects the aspiration to ‘be French’, thus distinguishing herself from many of the other authors: ‘I had no pretensions of becoming, or being taken for, French, like a lot of foreigners who have taken up residence’ (32). Although she doesn't seek to blend in, she nonetheless hopes to participate in the local community in France during a further year in France, some 15 years later:

I knew I'd never be taken for a local—nor did I particularly want to pass myself off as one—but this time I did want to feel more like a member of my local community. Not just merely another expat biding her time until she moved on again. (48)

To this end she strives to get to know and converse with Francophones but continues to underscore her status as an outsider:

What I enjoy the most about living abroad is being an outsider—to be that person outside the glass looking in is a privileged, indeed, revelatory position to be in. In France, my accent continued to underline my outsider status. It said to my new home that I was not from here; that I was a traveller. And that was fine by me. (72)

Alone among the authors, Bagwell sees her distance from French identity—her non-Frenchness—as entirely advantageous. And its consequences are clear in her portrayal of France, which is not simply the aesthetic paradise seen in some of the other memoirs. Indeed, Bagwell is primarily concerned with training her journalist's eye on 'the other side of France, the one we Francophiles (and most French) would prefer not to acknowledge' (277), and to this end she focuses on unemployment, nuclear reactors, rural poverty, racial prejudice and religious tensions, affirming that it is 'easy to forget' (277) the less picturesque aspects of the country. In other words, she opts for an analytical rather than a sentimental position, a clear-eyed rather than misty-eyed approach that appears linked to her self-positioning in terms of her working-class roots.

Her positioning, however, is not stable. Despite an initial refusal of the dream version of French life, the resistance subsides; Bagwell flirts with the fantasy, although she recounts it with a liberal dose of irony. Bagwell's initial position is an explicit rejection of the motivations typical of the memoirs. Explaining her first stay in France, she explains: 'I didn't go to write a book, nor was I looking for a Provençal ruin to renovate. I hadn't fallen in love with a Frenchman' (1). She nonetheless peppers her narrative with the ups and downs of her 'love affair with France' (1, 22, 270, 279, 291), which includes both loving and loathing. Then, halfway through the book, she includes a chapter called 'Rural Dreams' (121), where she fantasises about owning a rural cottage and living the dream. Interestingly, here she likens herself to all the other Francophiles, referring to 'people like us who dreamed of owning a little cottage in some out of the way hamlet in the French countryside' (122), and claiming that 'Michael and I were no different' from the 'hordes of Anglo-Saxons [fantasising] about owning their own rural idyll in France' in the wake of Peter Mayle's memoir (122). She writes 'We knew what we wanted. In our mind's eye, the cottage of our dreams would have thick beamed ceilings and a large open fireplace' (123) and launches into a three-paragraph description

of her ideal purchase, which resembles Mayle's version rather than the postfeminist vision, and becomes increasingly stereotypical to the point of comedy:

You could spend part of your time converting the old barn into a self-catering *gîte* that you could let out to help fund your rural lifestyle, and then write a bestselling account of the experience. You would make friends with the ruddy-faced, barrel-stomached locals who would tip you off about where in the woods to scrounge the best truffles during the season. (124)

The irony emerges, and it becomes clear that although Bagwell can picture herself among the other Francophiles, there remains an incongruity: having disavowed the dream from the start, she doesn't really feel she belongs in this picture in any plausible way.

While Bagwell's flirtation with the French fantasy life is measured, and contained within a chapter, Barbara Biggs recounts a more dramatic seduction, purchasing a property after only a couple of days in Paris. She too, however, contrives to maintain an ironic distance from the idealised version of France.

Barbara Biggs: *The Accidental Renovator*

Like Bagwell, Barbara Biggs does not arrive in Paris in pursuit of a dream of French life. Indeed she distances herself from a French identity from the very first page: 'the French and me, well, we're different. Chalk and cheese (me chalk), fish out of water (me fish)' (2005, 1). At the outset of *The Accidental Renovator* (2005), she is simply passing through, visiting a friend. She explains quite explicitly how alien travel to France had always appeared to her. A self-identified 'working class lass' (7), she saw Europe as a whole as a destination for those of a different social stratum. Her previous travels were in Asia:

South East Asia was cheap and you could live like a queen on nothing. A most agreeable state for a working class lass like myself. Europe, though, was another matter. It always seemed like a place for other people. In my mind it was expensive, exotic, sophisticated and exciting in a historic, extravagant way. [...] It seemed so far away. Like something only rich people did. (7)

A subcategory of dreams of Europe, Francophilia is cast as a middle-class pursuit, and by dissociating herself from this class, Biggs excludes herself from those who would indulge in it. In marked contrast to the desires of the memoirists who had always dreamt of Paris, Biggs never imagined herself in Europe:

I'd done a lot of things in my life and taken insane risks—escaped war in Cambodia, dodged death threats, got myself deported from a couple of countries—a walking piece of cheap thriller anthropology you might say, but living in Europe seemed like an impossible mystery. It's not that I wanted to, but if I did? (7)

The prefabricated fantasy of life of France does not appear to be shared by Biggs. And when she ends up staying in France considerably longer than her planned four-day visit, she distances herself from expatriates who are 'following some kind of dream' and who believe living in Paris will transform them (59).

A further way in which *The Accidental Renovator* differs from the majority of the Australian memoirs of France is in making no claims to present an insider's view. On the contrary, Biggs has no pretensions to being seen as a local: 'I'm a tourist who can't even say bonjour without misunderstanding' (14). She claims to be 'moronic about names and landmarks' (254) and uninterested in learning them:

I want to look at shops, some real estate, and wander around alone looking at monuments I stumble across without the time consuming task of actually entering them or discovering what they are. It's a philistine's way of seeing a city. (9)

And in keeping with the crassest kind of tourist identity, she flaunts her lack of the merest veneer of cultural familiarity without apology: 'I don't know anything about anything at all, a fact that is brought home to me here in Paris on a disturbingly regular basis' (253). Her embrace of a philistine identity can be interpreted as a provocative, class-based refusal to identify with middle-class aspirations to French sophistication.

And yet Biggs too is seduced by the dream of a beautiful daily domestic life of French purchases and dinners:

After only a day here, I don't want to just be a tourist, I want to buy everything in sight and take it home to cook or eat on a balcony overlooking Paris rooftops. But I am practical and know that dreaming is a designated pastime of the tourist ... (11)

Although she recognises this dream for what it is, this does not however stop her from sliding, almost despite herself, into realising the fantasy. For she buys an apartment more or less on impulse, as she tells it, then renovates it with attention to period details and the Italian bathroom finish, and the website photos show views of her apartment, with a table set before a window framing a Paris skyline, and a soft-focus image labelled 'ParisMostRomantic' (Biggs, n.d.). The dream is realised, or is at least marketed to others in the renting of the apartment. It is as if the fantasy version of French life imposes itself, refuses to be written out of her story.

As the title makes clear, however, the transformation is viewed as entirely 'accidental', not something Biggs chose in any purposeful way, and not driven by identity concerns. Instead, it is framed as 'play'. When she outlines her plans to spend a day in Paris inspecting apartments with real estate agents, she explains 'I'm not looking to buy. I'm just playing' (2005, 10) and repeats this claim twice more (12, 19). It's an extension of looking at castles on the internet (9), as if she has belatedly realised that she too can join in this particular role-play, previously reserved for those from a different background. When she makes what she considers a ludicrously low offer on an apartment, to her surprise it is accepted. She then continues to play the game, in which she invests her money, but not her sense of self. Similarly, when she manages to dress with style, she describes it as a 'fluke' (222). Looking stylish, living in Paris: these are not represented as part of her identity, or of a narrative of finding her real self, but occur haphazardly.

In both Biggs and Bagwell's memoirs, then, we find the authors clearly articulating a class-based resistance to the idealised French life, and yet dabbling in the dream, feeling the seductive pull of the fantasy without embracing it wholeheartedly.

Age

Like class, age appears to provide a base from which to resist writing a memoir of living in France as fulfilment of a postfeminist dream. If we take the memoirs by older Australian women, we find what amounts to a generational challenge to the postfeminist fantasy, the latter being more prominent among authors in their thirties. Once again, however, we find that postfeminist discourses are not simply absent from these memoirs, but need to be negotiated, and the focal point of this negotiation is the question of autonomy.

The memoirs by Elaine Lewis, Nadine Williams and Maureen Cashman were published when their authors were in their mid-sixties and early seventies. Autonomy is never taken for granted in these memoirs and professional identity is prized over domestic accomplishment. These are women whose lives have been buffeted by the decisions of others—notably husbands and parents—and they are intensely aware that their independence is ‘a hard-won, precious prize’ (Williams 2007, 57; cf. Lewis 2006, 19–20). Unlike those authors who imagine their lives to be simply the result of their free choice (such as Raoul and Archer as discussed in Chapter 5), they understand that the choices available to them are constrained. Cashman reflects on ‘how circumstances, events, experiences, affections and cultural memories both influenced the range and kinds of choices available to us, and limit the way we deal with them’ (2008, 310). They invest in their professional persona: Cashman as the village writer in Espagnac (2008, 31) and as a teacher; Williams as a ‘tough, dogged and resilient’ journalist (2007, 124); Lewis in her bookshop, shunning the retirement path friends have taken (2006, 73). These memoirs are far from resembling taste and lifestyle manuals—no domestic goddess, Williams sees herself as a ‘pragmatic, resourceful survivor’ (2007, 124)—and interestingly are among the more culturally aware memoirs. We saw in Chapter 3 how these three stand out in resisting the temptation to claim Frenchness and end up highlighting their Australianness in their memoirs. Part of this is a refusal to identify with the postfeminist construction of the French dream-life. A product of their generation, these authors pen a feminist rather than a postfeminist narrative.

But the postfeminist ideal is not simply absent from these memoirs. Although Lewis resolutely seeks fulfilment ‘from focusing on projects outside the self’ as ‘a question of survival’ (2006, 98), both Williams and Cashman toy with the dream, weigh up the possibilities. Williams undertakes a makeover—‘I have fashioned a new me who loves preparing food, a middle-aged Nadine seeking a richer way of living’ (2007, 179)—and no longer feels that ‘being joined at the hip’ to a man is the ‘worst thing that could happen to a woman’ (281–82) before ultimately rejecting the ideal of a French life. Cashman contemplates staying in France and dallies with the idea of romance (2008, 206), but is finally not seduced by a lifestyle of consumption and domesticity as ‘just another member of the leisure culture’ (317). She sees through the fantasy version of life in France: ‘everywhere I go, I see English people working like slaves on houses they’ve bought here’ (224). Nonetheless, the authors feel obliged

to entertain these possibilities in their memoirs, as if France is the place where the lure of the postfeminist lifestyle must at least be thought through, even if it is finally eschewed. In other words, France is the arena in which postfeminist dreams are tried on for fit, but whether or not they are accepted tends to be determined by class and age, with younger, middle-class women more likely to espouse these ideals, as suggested by the academic literature (Douglas 2010; Tasker and Negra 2007).

Whiteness

Sometimes the omissions and absences are as telling as the texts themselves. As noted earlier, there is a conspicuous absence of non-Anglo-Australian backgrounds among the authors of memoirs of living in France, the exception being Marisa Raoul, who refers to her Italian father and a year spent in Italy as a child, but nonetheless refers to herself as an 'Anglo' (33) among the French. In order to explore this absence, a small detour into a related genre is instructive: chick lit—epitomised by *Bridget Jones's Diary*—is seen as the emblematic postfeminist genre (Harzewski 2011; Ferriss and Young 2006).

Indigenous Australian author and social commentator Anita Heiss writes across a variety of fiction and non-fiction genres. In addition to essays, poetry and travel articles, she has penned both a memoir—*Am I Black Enough for You?* (2012)—and a series of prizewinning novels classed as black chick lit, or 'choc-lit' (Heiss 2012, 155). One of these novels, *Paris Dreaming* (2011), is the tale of an Aboriginal Australian woman living and working temporarily in the French capital, and it is interesting to compare it with Heiss's memoir.

In *Paris Dreaming*, Libby Cutmore, a glamorous, thirty-ish urban professional who has sworn off men, creates for herself the opportunity to work at the Musée du Quai Branly, dedicated to indigenous arts and cultures from around the world. In Paris she is thrown into 'a city full of culture, fashion and love. Surrounded by thousands of attentive men, nude poets, flirtatious baristas and smooth-tongued lotharios, romance has suddenly become a lot more tempting' (publisher's description). *Paris Dreaming* is the sequel to *Manhattan Dreaming*. Both feature strong female characters, girl talk, fashion, shopping and the tried and true chick lit themes of romance and infidelity, and Paris, like Manhattan,

is recognised as a fitting stage for the postfeminist narrative. Like the authors of the Australian-in-France memoirs, narrator Libby talks of her 'new life' (134, 162) in Paris, a life of romantic strolls, pashminas and pastries.

In her novels, Heiss quite purposefully set out both to broaden her readership and to educate while entertaining, and has accomplished both successfully (Heiss 2012, 155–63; Mathew 2016). She uses the genre to showcase indigenous culture, with a liberal dose of name-dropping of her favourite artists, and to challenge stereotypes by depicting a range of twenty-first-century Aboriginal experiences and identities. Conflicts among characters illustrate contemporary debates on indigenous issues. Mathew (2015, 1) notes that Heiss joins other non-white authors worldwide in appropriating the chick lit genre for her own purposes, destabilising it in the process.¹

Heiss's memoir, on the other hand, refers to Paris only in passing. *Am I Black Enough for You?* revolves around a court case (in which Heiss was one of nine applicants in a class action against journalist Andrew Bolt for breaching the Racial Discrimination Act), and contextualises questions of identity in stories of Heiss's upbringing, education and experiences. Heiss's visits to Paris in 2003 and 2010 are mentioned (177–78, 192–93) with accounts of disagreements there with authors and academics about indigenous research ethics and the relationship between language and identity. They only merit a couple of pages in her memoir. In other words, in the identity-focused genre of the memoir, the time spent in France is not a self-defining moment for Heiss. France is not the place where her identity was forged or reforged; it does not represent a 'new life'. Other identity issues are far more pressing, and her identity is unwavering:

Wherever I am in Australia or overseas, I am always Wiradjuri. My connection is to my country, my people, the land my mob has always come from. Therefore, my artistic creation has never strayed from being that of the voice of a Wiradjuri woman aware of where she will always belong. (2012, 8)

¹ Cf. Jess Butler (2013, 50) on the potential of women of colour to disrupt the whiteness of postfeminism.

Both Heiss's memoir and her *Paris Dreaming* challenge the whiteness of postfeminism and show that a thirty-ish Indigenous woman too might wear Revlon, enjoy shopping at Tiffany's and prefer spa days to camping. But while Paris remains an icon of elegance, fashion, shopping and romance, it is not a setting for Heiss herself to reformulate her identity.

It is enlightening to juxtapose Heiss's work with that of Patti Miller, for Miller also identifies herself as from Wiradjuri lands. Indeed, her Wiradjuri identification is prominent in the marketing of the book—the publisher's description emphasises that 'Miller grew up on Wiradjuri land in country Australia where her heart and soul belonged'—leading the less careful reader to imagine that the author may be Indigenous. Miller also highlights her working-class rural background, 'from a scrabbling farming family' (12).² Miller published her memoir *Ransacking Paris* (2015) after spending a year there some 10 years earlier. Since her original stay in Paris, she has returned there each year to coach other Anglophones in life writing, thus assuming a facilitating role in the perpetuation of the Paris memoir phenomenon. And her tale of life in Paris is very much about belonging and not belonging.

Miller's rural poor background doesn't inhibit her 'romantic French symptoms' (14). Unlike Bagwell and Biggs, she desired France from her teenage years; she writes of 'a dream that can propel you to the other side of the world [...] this longing for elsewhere' (9), of her 'longing for difference' (158) and 'longing for another imagined world' (158–59). Although sensitive to beauty, her attraction to Paris is intellectual rather than consumerist, and the book is structured around conversations with famous memoirists from Montaigne to Ernaux. Unlike Heiss, Miller feels split in her simultaneous connection to France and to the Australian landscape (199). Paris impinges on her sense of self in a way that it doesn't for Heiss, for whom the dream of a new French life belongs to the realm of fiction, not memoir.

2 Both these aspects of her identity are contested by Indigenous writer Melissa Lucashenko. Miller says of Lucashenko: 'She called me white, middle class and neurotic when we appeared together on a panel at Adelaide Writers Week' (Baum 2015).

Whiteness and mobility

Academic discussions of whiteness and mobility have focused primarily on contact zones in colonial and postcolonial contexts, on travel writing by Europeans about non-European destinations. Mary Louise Pratt identifies 'a sense of ownership, entitlement and familiarity' among these authors (2008, 3), epitomised in the 'monarch-of-all-I-survey' scene (197), the traveller's all-encompassing gaze of mastery over the foreign landscape and those that inhabit it. Not only non-Europeans, however, are the object of this gaze. Perceived hierarchies of civilisation and whiteness mean that the discourse is replicated within Europe, such that one finds 'German or British accounts of the Mediterranean sounding a lot like German or British accounts of South America' (12). Traces of this view can be found in Peter Mayle's account of the colourful and quaint inhabitants of Provence (cf. Holland and Huggan 1998, 15). And not only Europeans are the subject of the imperial gaze. Angela Woollacott analyses the self-positioning of Australian women's sea travel to England and their impressions of the British colonies that were ports of call. She explores the women's identification with the British colonisers, even if they were seen as outsiders once they arrived in London:

Occupying an in-between ranking in imperial hierarchy, Australian women sought to elide the inferiority inherent in their colonialness by emphasizing their whiteness and their economic and cultural privileging. (1997, 1006)

The pairing of Australia and France, however, is not obviously hierarchical, making it difficult to see the relevance of an imperial gaze to travel writing by Australians about France. Difference dynamics are in play. Although Australians may exoticise France, they are not defining themselves in relation to a racial other, and may well find themselves equally exoticised by the French. In the memoirs, whiteness cannot simply be inferred from the gaze onto its other.

Whiteness may be less visible beyond the 'space of imperial encounters', as Pratt characterises the contact zone (2008, 8), but as Richard Dyer points out, it is not only when it is explicitly contrasted with non-white that whiteness needs to be studied (1997, 13). What then are the marks of whiteness in the corpus of contemporary Anglo-Australian memoirs of France? Peggy McIntosh writes of white privilege as 'an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, assurances, tools, maps, guides,

code books, passports, visas, clothes, compass, emergency gear and blank cheques' (1988, 1–2), a form of cultural capital that enables mobility without the bearer being aware of it. Richard Dyer probes the white imaginary to identify a spirit of 'enterprise' associated with energy, will, ambition, control of self and milieu (1997, 13–33), and achievements that are attributed to individual actions rather than position and circumstances.

These attributes are clearly reflected in the postfeminist themes identified in Chapter 5, where we saw the assumption of the right to mobility, easy acceptance of the idea that one's choice of country and place of residence is unrestricted, and lack of awareness of privilege. These are held in the invisible knapsack alongside the credit card. Meanwhile, the project of the self, the disciplined makeover of life and body, is an enterprise requiring the application of will, energy and effort. Characteristic of postfeminist discourses and exemplified in the corpus, together these discourses underline the assumptions of whiteness underpinning the memoirs.

What do class, age and colour have to do with it?

The starting point for this chapter was the idea that France is frequently constructed in the memoirs as the ideal location for Australian women to embody postfeminist ideals of style, romance and above all self. But if the postfeminist fantasyland version of France beckons, it does not beckon equally to all. For a start, and somewhat predictably, the memoirs by the six male authors do not fit the paradigm at all: although some find romance they are not concerned with curating a new, more stylish self, and although often passionate about food, they express little interest in shopping, renovation or the aesthetics of the household environment. But whereas these concerns are absent from the men's memoirs, they are invariably raised in the women's life writing, even if only to challenge them.

The literature suggests that postfeminist discourses tend to assume and affirm a young, white, middle-class, heterosexual female subject, and the identification with Paris as a means to achieve a postfeminist makeover is certainly most notable among the authors who fit this demographic. As far as class is concerned, the association of travel to France with economic privilege reinforces this subject position. The affirmation of

a default position for the postfeminist subject, however, simultaneously generates positions from which to challenge the postfeminist narrative of the Australian in France. Thus we see overt resistance to the dream of Paris among older authors and those from working-class backgrounds. Nevertheless, even in these cases, the mythical construction of France appears to be so powerful that the possibility of a postfeminist life there still needs to be entertained. The fantasy life of blissful domesticity still needs to be rehearsed, even if it is ultimately not pursued. Whether or not they embrace the domestic princess ideal, the Australian women authors feel the need to engage with postfeminist discourses of identity when writing about life in France, as if France were the site where postfeminist ideals are necessarily confronted.

In addition to these more overt challenges, we find more subtle ways in which the memoirs divert the postfeminist narrative to other purposes. The following chapters provide close readings of two such memoirs: Sarah Turnbull's *Almost French* and Ellie Nielsen's *Buying a Piece of Paris*. In each case, the author fits the default postfeminist demographic and the memoirs embrace the representation of France as a centre of elegance and shopping paradise, and engage with the dream of becoming French. As we shall see, however, both use the fantasy of Frenchness as a lure to entice the reader towards some valuable lessons, in the first case about culture, in the second, language.

This text is taken from *What's France got to do with it?: Contemporary memoirs of Australians in France*, by Juliana de Nooy, published 2020 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.

doi.org/10.22459/WF.2020.06