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"Nanna Style": The Countercultural Politics of Retro Femininities

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Over the past two decades in the West, practices of ethical consumption have become increasingly visible within mainstream consumer culture (Lewis and Potter). While they manifest in a variety of forms, such practices are frequently articulated to politics of anti-consumerism, environmentalism, and sustainable consumption through which lifestyle choices are conceived as methods for investing in—and articulating—ethical and social concerns. Such practices are typically understood as both a reflection of the increasing global influence of neoliberal, consumer-oriented modes of citizenship and a response to the destabilisation of capitalism’s certainties in the wake of ongoing climate change and the global financial crisis (Castells et al.; Miller).

Consume less, consume differently, recycle, do-it-yourself: activities that have historically been associated with explicitly activist movements (see Bryner) are now increasingly accessible and attractive to people for whom these consumption choices might serve as their first introduction to countercultural practices. While the notion of “counterculture” is today a contested concept—one that no longer refers only to “the” (i.e. 1960s) counterculture, but also to a range of radical movements and practices—it is one which is useful for thinking about the ways in which difference from, and resistance to, the “mainstream” can be asserted.

Within contemporary consumer culture, resistance is now often articulated in ways which suggests that the lines between the “countercultural” and the “mainstream” are no longer clear cut

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(Desmond, McDonagh and O'Donohue 263). For Castells et al. (12), this is especially the case when the structures of capitalism are under strain, as this is when alternative and countercultural ways of living increasingly enter the mainstream. The concept of counterculture, then, is useful for understanding the ways in which progressive political values may be reimagined, rearticulated and represented within the mainstream, thereby offering access points to political participation for people who may not necessarily describe their activities as resistant or even as politically engaged (Barnett et al. 45).

One of the most interesting aspects of this phenomenon is how a progressive politics of consumption is expressed through images and aesthetics that are culturally coded as conservative. Across a range of contemporary media and popular cultural forms, notions of ethical consumption are often paralleled by resurgences in practices associated with domesticity and traditional femininities. From retro fashions referencing 1940s and 1950s femininity to the growing popularisation of crafting and cooking, many of the "old-fashioned" practices of domesticity that had been critiqued and rejected by second wave feminism (see Brunson *The Feminist* 216), are being reimagined as simultaneously nostalgic and politically progressive choices for women (and, sometimes, for men).

This paper explores how the contemporary mobilisation of traditional femininities can activate progressive, countercultural politics of gender and consumption. Specifically, it will examine the popularisation of the "nanna" as a countercultural icon that exemplifies the contemporary politics of retro femininities. Drawing upon data from our larger, more comprehensive studies, this paper uses two case studies—the rise of "nanna-style" cookbooks and the "nanna culture" of indie lifestyle magazine *Frankie*—to explore the ways that traditional femininities can be reworked to prompt a rethinking of current consumption practices, foster connection (in the case of nanna-style cookbooks) and challenge the limitations of contemporary gender norms (in the case of *Frankie*). While we are not suggesting that these politics are necessarily deliberately encoded in the texts (although sometimes they may be) or that these texts are inevitably interpreted in the way that we are suggesting, this paper offers preliminary textual "readings" (Kellner 12) of the

ways that countercultural values can be uncovered within mainstream cultural forms.

Nanna-style cookbooks and *Frankie* magazine are each examples of a broader resignification of the nanna that has been occurring across a number of sites of contemporary popular culture. Previous associations of the nanna as old, conservative or uncool are being replaced with new images of nannas as active, skilled, funky women. For example, this is evident in the recent resurgences of craft cultures, which reshape the meanings of contemporary knitting as being "not your grandma's knitting" (Fields 150), but as a "fun, hip, and political" new hobby (Groeneveld 260). Such craft activities have been described using discourses of "revolution and reclamation" (Groeneveld 266) to mobilise countercultural practices ranging from explicitly activist "craftivism" (Corbett and Housley) to more ordinary, everyday politics of consumption and time management. Through activities such as "knit ins", yarn bombing, and Stitch "N" Bitch circles, contemporary craft practices can be seen as an expression of the "historically reflexive and community minded new amateur", whose craft practices facilitate new connections between amateurs to enable "alternative values and ways of living" and reject negative aspects of modern consumer society (Hackney 187).

Even for women with less explicit activist commitments, an investment in the practices of retro femininities can provide opportunities for community-building, including across generations, in which participants are offered not only a "welcome respite from the rush and hurry of everyday life", but also access to a suite of activities through which they can resist dominant approaches to consumption (Nathanson 119). Consequently, nostalgic images of grandmotherly practices need not signal only a conservative marketing strategy or desire to return to a (patriarchal, pre-feminist) past as they are sometimes interpreted (see Trussler), but a means through which images of the past can be resignified and reinterpreted in the context of contemporary needs and politics.

Cooking Nanna-Style

Nanna-style cookbooks are an example of "emergent uses of the past" (Bramall 15) for present purposes. "Nanna-style" is a currently popular category within the cookbook publishing and retailing industries that, for many critics, has

been understood as an essentially conservative response to the financial uncertainties of the economic downturn (Orr).

Certainly, nanna-style cookbooks are, on one level at least, uncritically and unreflexively nostalgic for a time when women's cooking was central to providing the comforts of home. In [Nonna to Nana: Stories of Food and Family](#), grandmothers are presented as part of a "fast-disappearing generation of matriarchs" whose recipes must be preserved so that "we [can] honour the love and dedication [they] give through the simple gift of making and sharing their food" (DiBlasi and DiBlasi, book synopsis). [Merle's Kitchen](#), written by 79-year-old author and Country Women's Association (CWA) judge, Merle Parrish, is littered with reminiscences about what life was like "in those days" when the "kitchen was the heart of the home" and women prepared baked treats each week for their children and husbands (Parrish vii). [Sweet Paul Eat & Make: Charming Recipes and Kitchen Crafts You Will Love](#) is filled with the recipes and stories of author Paul Lowe's grandmother, Mormor, who doted on her family with delicious pancakes cooked at any time of the day.

Such images of the grandmother's selfless dedication to her family deploy the romance of what Jean Duruz (58) has called "Cooking Woman," a figure whose entire identity is subsumed within the pleasure and comfort that she provides to others. Through the medium of the cookbook, Cooking Woman serves the fantasies of the "nostalgic cosmopolitan" (Duruz 61) for whom the pleasures of the nanna reflect an essentially (albeit unacknowledged) conservative impulse. However, for others, the nostalgia of Cooking Woman need not necessarily involve endorsement of her domestic servitude, but instead evoke images of an (imagined, utopian) past as a means of exploring the pleasures and contradictions of contemporary femininities and consumption practices (see Hollows 190).

Such texts are part of a broader set of practices associated with what Bramall (21) calls "austerity chic." Austerity chic's full political potential is evident in explicitly countercultural cookbooks like Heidi Minx's [Home Rockanomics](#), which invokes the DIY spirit of punk to present recycling, cooking and craft making as methods for investing in an anti-corporate, vegan activist politics. But for Bramall (31), even less

challenging texts featuring nostalgic images of nannas can activate progressive demands about the need to consume more sustainably in ways that make these ideas more accessible to a broader range of constituencies.

In particular, such texts offer forms of "alternative hedonism" through which practices of ethical consumption need not be characterised by experiences of self-denial but by a reconceptualisation of what constitutes the "good life" (Soper 211). In the practices of austerity chic as they are presented in nanna-style cookbooks, grandmotherly practices of baking and cooking are presented as frugal and self-sufficient, but also as granting access to experiences of pleasure, including the pleasures of familial warmth, cohesion and connection. Specifically, these books emphasise the ways in which cooking, and baking in particular, helps to forge connections between generations. For the authors of *Pass It Down and Keep Baking*, the recipes of grandmothers and great-aunts are described as "treasures" to be "cherished and passed on to future generations" (Wilkinson and Wilkinson 2). For the authors of *Nonna to Nana*, the food of the authors' own grandmother is described as the "thread that bound our family together" (DiBlasi and DiBlasi 2).

In contrast to some of the more explicitly political retro-inspired movements, which often construct the new formations of these practices as distinct from those of older women (e.g. "not your grandma's knitting"), these more mainstream texts celebrate generational cohesion. Given the ways in which feminist histories have tended to discursively pit the various "waves" of feminism in opposition to that which came before, the celebration of the grandmother as a unifying figure becomes a means through which connections can be forged between past and present subjectivities (see Bramall 134). Such intergenerational connections—and the notion that grandmotherly practices are treasures to be preserved—also serve as a way of reimagining and reinterpreting (often devalued) feminine domestic activities as alternative sources of pleasure and of the "good life" at a time when reducing consumption and adopting more sustainable lifestyle practices is becoming increasingly urgent (see Bramall; Soper).

While this might nonetheless be interpreted as compliant with contemporary patriarchal and capitalist structures—indeed, there is nothing

inherently countercultural about conceiving the domestic as a site of pleasure—the potential radicalism of these texts lies in the ways that they highlight how investment in the fantasies, pleasures and activities of domesticity are not available only to women, nor are they associated only with the reproduction of traditional gender roles. For example in *Sweet Paul Eat & Make*, Lowe's adoption of many of Mormor's culinary and craft practices highlights the symbolic work that the nanna performs to enable his own commitment to forms of traditionally feminine domesticity. The fact that he is also large, hairy, heavily tattooed and pictured with a cute little French bulldog constructs Lowe as a simultaneously masculine and "camp" figure who, much like the playful and excessive femininity of well-known figures like Nigella Lawson (Brunsdon "Martha" 51), highlights the inherent performativity of both gendered and domestic subjectivities, and hence challenges any uncritical investment in these traditional roles.

The countercultural potential of nanna-style cookbooks, then, lies not necessarily in an explicitly activist politics, but in a politics of the everyday. This is a politics in which seemingly conservative, nostalgic images of the nanna can make available new forms of identity, including those that emerge between generations, between the masculine and the feminine, and between imagined utopias of domesticity and the economic and environmental realities of contemporary consumer culture.

***Frankie's* Indie Nanna**

The countercultural potential of the nanna is also mobilised in fashion and lifestyle publications, including *Frankie* magazine, which is described as part of a "world where nanna culture is revered" ("*Frankie* Magazine Beats the Odds"). *Frankie* exemplifies both a reaction against a particular brand of femininity, and an invitation to consume more sustainably as part of the indie youth trend. Indie, as it manifests in *Frankie*, blends retro aesthetics with progressive politics in ways that present countercultural practices not as explicitly oppositional, but as access points to inclusive, empowering and pleasurable femininities.

Frankie's version of nanna culture can be found throughout the magazine, particularly in its focus on retro styles. The nanna is invoked in instructions for making nanna-style items, such

as issue 46's call to "Pop on a Cuppa: How to Make Your Own Nanna-Style Tea Cosy" (Lincolne 92-93), and in the retro aesthetics found throughout the magazine, including recipes depicting baked goods served on old-fashioned crockery and features on homes designed with a vintage theme (see [Nov.-Dec. 2012](#) and Mar.-Apr. 2013). Much like nanna-style cookbooks, *Frankie's* celebration of nanna culture offers readers alternative ways of thinking about consumption, inviting them to imagine the "satisfactions to be had from consuming differently" (Soper 222) and to construct ethical consumption as both expressions of alternative critical consumer culture and as practices of "cool" consumer connoisseurship (Franklin 165). Here, making your own items, purchasing second-hand items, or repurposing old wares, are presented not as forms of sacrifice, but as pleasurable and fashionable choices for young women.

This contrasts with the consumption practices typically promoted in other contemporary women's magazines. Most clearly, *Frankie's* promotion of nanna chic stands in opposition to the models of desirable femininity characteristic of glossies like *Cosmopolitan*. The archetypal "Cosmo Girl" is represented as a woman seeking to achieve social mobility and desirability through consumption of cosmetics, fashion and sexual relationships (Oullette 366-367). In contrast, the nanna, with her lack of overt sexuality, older age, and conservative approach to consumption, invites identification with forms of feminine subjectivity that resist the patriarchal ideologies that are seen as typical of mainstream women's magazines (see Gill 217).

Frankie's cover artwork demonstrates its constructed difference from modes of desirable femininity promoted by its glossy counterparts. [The cover of the magazine's 50th issue](#), for example, featured a embroidered collage depicting a range of objects including a sewing machine, teapot, retro glasses, flowers and a bicycle. This cover, which looks handcrafted and features items that evoke both nanna culture and indie style, offers forms of feminine style and desirability based on homecrafts, domestic self-sufficiency and do-it-yourself sustainability.

The nanna herself is directly referenced on [the cover of issue 52](#), which features an illustration of a woman in an armchair, seated in front of vintage-style floral wallpaper, a cup of tea in her hand, and her hair in a bun. While she does not

possess physical features that signify old age such as grey hair or wrinkles, her location and style choices can each be read as signifiers of the nanna. Yet by featuring her on the cover of a young women's magazine—and by dressing her in high-heeled boots—the nanna is constructed as subject position available to young, potentially desirable women. In contrast to glossy women's magazines featuring images of young models or celebrities in sexualised poses (see Gill 184), *Frankie* offers a progressive politics of gender in which old-fashioned activities can provide means of challenging identities and consumption practices dominant within mainstream cultural industries.

As Bramall (121) argues of "retro femininities in austerity," such representations provide readers access to "subjectivities [that] may incorporate a certain critique of consumer capitalism." By offering alternative modes of consumption in which women are not necessarily defined by youth and sexual desirability, *Frankie's* indie nanna provides an implicit critique of mainstream consumerism's models of ideal femininity. This gender politics thus relies not simply on an uncritical "gender reversal" (Plumwood 62), but rather reworks and recombines elements of past and present femininities to create new meanings and identities.

Much like nanna-style cookbooks' grandmotherly figures who unite generations, *Frankie* constructs the nanna as a source of wisdom and a figure to be respected. For example, a two-page spread entitled "Ask a Nanna" featured Polaroid pictures of nannas answering the question: "What would you tell your 20-year-old self?" (Evans 92-93). The magazine also regularly features older women, such as the profile describing Sonia Grevell as "a champion at crochet and living generously" (Corry 107).

The editors' letter of a recent issue describes the issue's two major themes as "nannas and dirty, dirty rock", which are described as having a "couple of things in common": "they've been around for a while, you sometimes have to talk loudly in front of them and they rarely take shit from anyone" (Walker and Burke 6). The editors suggest that such "awesomeness" can be emulated by "eating a bikkie while gently moshing around the living room" or "knitting with drum sticks"—both unlikely juxtapositions that represent the unconventional nanna and her incorporation into indie youth culture. This

celebration of the nanna stands in contrast to a mainstream media culture that privileges youth, especially for women, and suggests both common interests and learning opportunities between generations.

While neither *Frankie* nor nanna-style cookbooks present themselves as political texts, when they are read within their particular historical and social contexts, they offer new ways of thinking about how countercultural practices are—and could be—mobilised by, and made accessible to, constituencies who may not otherwise identify with an explicitly oppositional politics. These texts sometimes appear to be located within a politically ambiguous nexus of compliance and resistance, but it is in this space of ambiguity that new identities and new commitments to progressive politics can be forged, normalised and made more widely available.

These texts may not ultimately challenge capitalist structures of consumption, and they remain commodified products, but by connecting oppositional and mainstream practices, they offer new ways of conceiving the relationships between age, gender, sustainability and pleasure. They suggest ways that we might reimagine consumption as more sustainable and more inclusive than currently dominant modes of capitalist consumerism.

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