

Feeling Like a Domestic Goddess:

Post-Feminism and Cooking

Nigella Lawson has become one of the UK's bestselling cookery writers. A food writer for British Vogue, Lawson has published four bestselling cookery books, How to Eat, How to be a Domestic Goddess, Nigella Bites, and Forever Summer, the latter two based on the Channel 4 primetime cookery shows of the same names. She has also been a columnist for the UK Sunday newspaper The Observer (where she was frequently interpreted as representing a 'feminist' voice), writes a beauty column for The Times and, perhaps not insignificantly for what follows, is a former member of the editorial board of Critical Quarterly. She has also gained an iconic status in the UK, becoming known simply by her first name like the UK's Delia (Smith) and the US Martha (Stewart). Press commentary about Nigella Lawson has extended far beyond her food writing to reflect on her heritage (she is daughter of former Tory MP, Nigel Lawson), the tragedies in her life (she lost her mother, sister and, most recently, her husband to cancer) and her love life (a well-publicized relationship with millionaire art collector, Charles Saatchi). However, most commentary betrays a fascination with her 'beauty' (in a British survey, she was voted the 3rd most beautiful woman in the world) and with the 'Nigella lifestyle' and what it represents¹.

The publication of Domestic Goddess in the UK in 2000 served to highlight the distance between feminism and cooking, at least within 'the popular'. The book provoked a huge debate in the press about the relationship between feminism, femininity and baking with Lawson being variously positioned as the pre-feminist housewife, as an anti-feminist Stepford wife, as the saviour of downshifting middle class career women, and as both the negative and positive product of post-feminism. In the process, while many columnists

couldn't get past odes to Nigella Lawson's beauty, many others equated baking with false consciousness and suggested there was but a short step from baking to domestic enslavement (Tyrer 2000) and a pre-feminist world of backstreet abortions (Moore 2000).

The coverage devoted to the book would seem to support Julia Hallam's argument that 'feminism as a (contradictory and unfixed) subject position is widely circulating as an interpretive strategy amongst... journalists' (cited in Read 2000: 119). From reading some of these accounts about the significance of a collection of recipes, it is easy to get the impression that while feminism might be 'contradictory and unfixed', the feminist's cake-making 'other', the housewife, is 'fixed' in a non-contradictory 1950s of both the popular and feminist imagination (although see, for example, Meyerowitz 1994 and Clarke 1997). While columnist for The Guardian, Charlotte Raven, claimed that for wannabe domestic goddesses 'the housewife represents stability and security' (2000: 5), the critiques leveled at Lawson frequently suggested that the housewife might represent this for feminism. If as Charlotte Brunsdon has argued, 'the opposition feminist/housewife was polemically and historically formative for second-wave feminism' (2000: 216), then it also seemed to be alive and well in the British press in the millennium.

In feminist cultural studies, there has been a concern with the new post-feminist identities that emerge 'between feminism and femininity' (see, for example, McRobbie 1994; Brunsdon 1997; and Moseley and Read 2002). However, such work has largely been concerned with youthful and/or non-domestic femininities (although exceptions exist

such as Rowe 1997.) What remains less clear is what emerges between the feminist and the housewife. It is in this context that I examine Nigella Lawson's cookery writing and television shows to identify what kind of post-feminist identity can emerge in a domestic context. In doing so, I avoid the more pejorative and celebratory conceptualizations of post-feminism, preferring the more historically informed idea of post-feminism. Such an approach is offered by Brunson who argues that the term post-feminism 'is quite useful if used in an historically specific sense to mark changes in popularly available understandings of femininity and a woman's place that are generally recognized as occurring in the 1980s.' (1997: 101) From this perspective, Lawson's conception of cooking is historically post-1970s feminism: while her construction of the cook does not conform to 1970s feminism, it nonetheless is a product of a historical period informed by feminism.

However, in what follows, Nigella Lawson's construction of the cook is not simply discussed in terms of gender but also in terms of class. If the press coverage about Nigella has showed a preoccupation with the relationship between the author and feminism, it also demonstrated a preoccupation with her privileged background and the lifestyle she represents. The reception of her TV show, Nigella Bites, frequently characterized it as a primarily about lifestyle and it was situated in terms of wider debates about the proliferation of lifestyle programmes on TV (see Moseley 2000 and 2001; and Bell, 2000 and forthcoming). While I have little desire to dispute the image of Nigella as a cover girl for the new middle class, an examination of her work begins to problematize some of the assumptions that underpin sociological theories of the new middle classes.

These theories frequently show little explicit concern with gender while implicitly gendering the new middle classes as masculine (for example, Featherstone 1991a and, for a critique, Hollows 2002). While Nigella Lawson does not specifically address a female reader, she nonetheless addresses specific conflicts and problems that are experienced by those inhabiting middle class feminine identities. As I go on to discuss below, these centre around the problem of time scarcity in the face of competing demands of paid labour, domestic labour and the ‘leisure-work’ (Bell, forthcoming) that is crucial to new middle class identity.

Finally, the paper argues that the sheer extent of the debate about Nigella as ‘domestic goddess’, and the other figures of middle class femininity that were produced and reproduced in the debate, demonstrates the multiple femininities that are in circulation and in competition in the present. The paper draws on the work of Elspeth Probyn to examine how in the debates about the significance of Nigella Lawson, the issue of choice – and making the ‘right’ choice - is presented as both a freedom and a problem that represents rather more than a change of wardrobe implied in some of the work on more youthful femininities.

The post-feminist cook

For those unfamiliar with Nigella Lawson’s output, it is perhaps necessary to give a sense of her style, a style recognizable enough to now be parodied on British television.ⁱⁱ The television shows, Nigella Bites (2000), Nigella Bites II (2001) and Forever Summer (2002), draw on some of the elements established in The Naked Chef (see Moseley

2001) in which the cooking takes place in the context of everyday life in her home in which we see her feed herself, her children and her friends. It is interspersed with images of the Nigella lifestyle: dropping off and picking up the kids, shopping for food, photoshoots for her books, writing on the computer, playing with the children, socializing with friends. Furthermore, and again comparisons with The Naked Chef are useful here, a narrative about Nigella's life is constructed across the series as she moves from the role of wife and mother in Nigella Bites through widowed single-parent in Nigella Bites II to a more carefree and newly-in-love partner in a reconstituted family in Forever Summer.ⁱⁱⁱ

Her cooking style is carefully distanced from the prim and proper efficiency of the (female) home economist and from the decontextualized precision of the (male) professional chef. Instead, Nigella makes a virtue of messiness (she throws egg shells into the sink and gets chili seeds all over the floor), acknowledges her own laziness ('It's not just because I'm lazy') and demonstrates her own incompetence as a sign of both the fool-proof nature and the pleasure of her cooking (she loves her mezzaluna 'because I'm incredibly clumsy and it makes me feel like one of those super-confident people').^{iv} For Lawson, it is all about 'cooking in context' (1999: 7). Her address to camera is frequently arch and flirtatious and peppered with quips: 'trust me, I'm not a doctor', she says as she puts on rubber gloves to chop chillis, and 'now I'm going to disrobe, de-rubber' as she takes them off.^v Likewise, as she picks up kitchen tongs to turn steak on the griddle, she quips, 'I like a little tong action'.^{vi} Her television shows and books are also laced with a range of popular and high cultural references that position her as a cultural omnivore: on television, she refers to her conical sieve as 'my Jean-Paul Gaultier', in Domestic

Goddess she compares tine marks on shortbread to ‘the scrappy lines that drive Gregory Peck mad in Spellbound’ (2000: 11), and in How to Eat she compares making mayonnaise to reading Henry James (1999: 13). However, this omnivorousness also extends to her culinary tastes: Nigella Bites contains a section on ‘trashy’ food with fried chicken in ‘Roseanne-like quantities’ and ‘Elvis Presley’s Peanut-Butter and Banana Sandwiches.’ (2001: 136-40) Such omnivorousness ‘enables the middle-class to re-fashion and re-tool itself through the use and association with tastes that were once associated with the working-class.’ (Skeggs, forthcoming) In this way, Nigella’s taste for the trashy serves less to dissolve the relationship between class and taste, and more to reaffirm the distinction of the new middle class (see also, Warde, Tomlinson and McMeekin 2000).

However, this sense of fun displayed in both television and books also relates to what one might characterize as the Nigella Lawson cooking philosophy that cooking should be pleasurable and should start from the desire to eat. As she tells up at the opening of the first episode (‘Fast Food’) of Nigella Bites, ‘The idea here for me is food that I love eating but doesn’t give me a nervous breakdown to cook... What I’m after is minimum effort for maximum pleasure in both the cooking and the eating.’ Throughout her television series, she constantly highlights the sensuous pleasures of the cooking process: a lemon pasta sauce smells ‘so fragrant, so comforting’ and is described as ‘harmonious, calm, voluptuous and creamy’, the smell of coriander is ‘like a drug its so strong’.^{vii} Squeezing out gelatine leaves becomes play: ‘There’s something curiously satisfying about all that squelching – oh, how lovely is this? Yaaah – creature from the deep.’^{viii}

Nigella not only advises her audience about how to free cooking of stress ('it's the sort of food you can make when you're so stressed out that just the idea of cooking makes you want to shriek'), but also to use cooking to combat stress: 'squish it around in here and really kind of bash it round and this will get rid of the day's stresses. Better to do that before the guests come!' Yet Lawson's approach isn't simply about fast food that fits with the demands of modern life: its also about the 'comfort cooking' as an escape from the demands of modern life. A Lemon Risotto is presented as not only comforting to eat, but 'immensely comforting to make: in times of strain, mindless repetitive activity – in this case, 20 minutes of stirring - can really help' (2001: 43). Likewise, the more time-consuming pleasures of baking are presented as 'feeling good, wafting along in the warm sweet-smelling air, unwinding, no longer being entirely an office creature.' (2000: vii)

As the discussion above suggests, this sense of cooking as pleasure goes in tandem with the ideas of eating as pleasure. Throughout the television shows, we see Nigella literally biting into a whole array of food and the show customarily ends with her, supposedly at night, picking from the fridge or attacking a just-cut piece of cake. While Delia Smith, the UK's top television cook, informed the viewer of the nature of wheat so they can get a better understanding of bread-making, Nigella denies knowing much about where salmon comes from: 'I'm a city girl, I'm not expected to know these things. My skill lies in eating.'^{ix} While Delia has declared she will never eat the dishes she cooks on TV, Nigella 'has nothing to declare but my greed' (1999: viii) While many of the professional male television chefs tell the viewer how excellent a dish is, Nigella demonstrates the pleasure the food induces as the camera lingers on her face as she eats and groans with

satisfaction. Eating like cooking also offers access to the drug-like qualities of food:

‘Happiness Soup’ has ‘such a sunny, mood-enhancing yellowness’ that it can ‘banish the blues’ (Lawson 2002: 28).

The significance of this emphasis on the pleasure of cooking and eating is the extent to which it differs from the accounts of the meanings women bring to cooking and eating in feminist sociology. This work has tended to situate cooking and food within debates about the sexual division of labour. These studies demonstrate that women are positioned as providers of food for others but maintain a difficult relationship to eating itself: women frequently use food to offer pleasure to family members yet have difficulty experiencing food as pleasurable themselves, particularly in a domestic context (Charles and Kerr 1988; and Martens 1997). For example, the title of Anne Murcott’s article, ‘It’s a Pleasure to Cook for him’, taken from a comment by one of her respondents, illustrates the extent to which the women she studied saw cooking, and the choice of what to cook and eat, as something done ‘in the service of some other(s)’. (1995: 94) As a result, women rarely cooked just for themselves. Similar findings are reported by Charles and Kerr who show how this is exacerbated by women’s fear of gaining weight. Women ‘deny themselves pleasure whereas one of their aims in preparing food for others is to give pleasure; women fundamentally cook to please men in particular’ (1988: 153). However, a few women in their study did seek to ‘treat’ themselves when they were home alone (1988: 70) and Shaun Moores has pointed to the similarity between this and the ‘guilty pleasures’ enjoyed by the woman who indulges her televisual tastes when no-one else is around (1993: 53).^x For Charles and Kerr, the pleasure gained from cooking

‘for him’ is the pleasure of demonstrating ‘care’ for others and, in Marjorie Devault’s work, it is this relationship between cooking and caring (for others) that cements the relationship between cooking and femininity: caring work is the ‘undefined, unacknowledged activity central to women’s identity.’ (1991: 4)

What I want to suggest is that the representation of cooking in Nigella Lawson’s work starts from the importance of satisfying and caring for the self rather than others and in this way offers an alternative mode of representing the pleasures of domestic femininity. I have already demonstrated how cooking as pleasure is represented in her shows and writing, but by linking the pleasures of cooking and eating, Lawson represents not only a feminine self that eats, but one that is very aware of what it wants to eat rather than deferring to the preferences of others.^{xi} ‘I don’t deny that food, its preparation, is about sharing, about connectedness’, she writes (and indeed much of her writing testifies to this), ‘But that’s not all that it’s about. There seems to me to be something robustly affirmative about taking trouble to feed yourself; enjoying life on purpose rather than by default.’ (1999: 134) By bracketing cooking, however fleetingly, from the demands of ‘cooking for’, she suggests that we can learn how to see cooking as ‘a pleasure in itself’ (1999: 135). Furthermore, by relating both cooking and eating to contexts, Nigella Lawson connects both with recognizable situations in everyday life. Chocolate fudge cake ‘serves 10. Or 1 with a broken heart’ (2001: 47) and comfort food ‘soothes’ when we ‘get tired, stressed, sad or lonely’ (2001: 31). Even low-fat food is linked with pleasure rather than deprivation, it’s what we eat when we want to feel as if our body is a

temple, not about ‘deprivation or, restraint, but rather the holy glow of self-indulgently virtuous pleasure.’ (2001: 223)

This emphasis on the pleasure of cooking and eating and the need for restraint appears to fit with the ‘calculated hedonism’ that has been seen to characterize the consumption practices of the new middle classes in which ‘discipline and hedonism are no longer seen as incompatible’. (Featherstone 1991b: 171) Here, the ability to shift from eating chocolate fudge cake to vegetable miso broth is linked to a ‘calculated de-control’ characterized by ‘an ability to move in and out of the condition of self-control thereby to experience a greater range of sensations.’ (Warde 1997: 92-3) For Bourdieu (1984), the ability to both pursue hedonistic pleasure as an aesthetic experience and maintain a disciplined and controlled relationship to the body distinguishes the new middle classes from both the restraint of the old middle classes and the lack of discipline and aesthetic distance that it seen to characterize working class taste. In Featherstone’s work, calculated hedonism involves a shift from the pleasures of hedonism to the denial of pleasure as the body is disciplined in the gym or on a diet. However, as Nigella’s ‘temple food’ demonstrates, discipline may also be linked with pleasures of asceticism rather than deprivation and Lupton (1996) suggests that these pleasures may be gendered insofar as they relate more closely to the way many women experience their relationship to both food and the body. Lury has suggested that calculated de-control is a disposition best associated with a masculine middle class as women often experience an ‘enforced de-control’ in which they feel little sense of the mastery and control over ‘the self’ that (some) men possess (1996: 242). What Lawson offers in its place is a sense of feeling as

if we were in control, as if the body was a temple. If women frequently lack control over ‘the self’ because they have also been excluded from constructions of ‘the individual’, this form of ‘imagining’ at least offers a means of exploring what it would feel like to be like to be in control (see Cronin 2000).

However, while acknowledging the pleasures of cooking and eating, Nigella Lawson cannot ignore the anxieties produced by cooking. Work by Devault, among others, suggests that while men do cook, they do not ‘feel the force of the morally charged ideal of deferential service that appears in so many women’s reports.’ (1991: 149) Cooking as caring is one of the key ways in which femininity is performed, in which ‘a woman conducts herself as recognizably womanly’. (Devault 1991: 118) Failure to perform in such a way is seen as an failure to be ‘properly feminine’, as demonstrated by the press coverage of the Greenham Common women which focused on ‘rancid’ and ‘burnt’ food and their ‘dirty’ pots and pans (Creswell cited in Morley 2000: 70). Therefore, while Lawson advocates that the cook should take pleasure from their own eating and should largely avoid cooking practices that cause displeasure, she also acknowledges that cooking does not occur in a vacuum

For these reasons, Lawson’s cookery attempts to negotiate the demands of both pleasing the self and pleasing, and caring for, others, addressing anxieties associated with cooking that frequently arise from a fear of being judged as ‘improperly’ feminine. This is dealt with in two key ways. First, the ‘sisterly’ conversational tone adopted by Lawson is an attempt to assuage anxiety: ‘I have wanted to make you feel that I’m there with you, in

the kitchen, as you cook.’ (1999: x) Potential failures are anticipated and the reader is assured that mistakes are not only ‘normal’ but they also need not be read as failures. For example, Domestic Goddess contains a photograph of an ‘Easy Almond Cake’ that has been patched up after it stuck to the tin: ‘these things happen to us all and I wanted to show it wasn’t the end of the world... Life isn’t lived in a lab.’ (2000: 6)^{xii} This reference to a scientific approach to cookery located in the public sphere relates to the second way in which Lawson seeks to negotiate anxiety by stressing the values of a feminine domestic culinary tradition. On a basic level, this is an attempt to inspire confidence but more crucially it is a way of acknowledging the pressures and pleasures of the feminine while refusing the need to be judged according to multiple culinary standards. The standards refused are those of the post-war dinner party which made the cook feel as if she had ‘to slave, to strive, to seat, to perform’ and those of restaurant chefs who have ‘to innovate, to elaborate, to impress the paying customer’. (1999: 330) In this way, while she acknowledges that ‘feeding work’ may not be unproblematic, she also claims that home-cooking is ‘the antithesis of restaurant cooking’^{xiii}, refusing the demands to combine the ‘caring self’ and the ‘performing self’ and be judged by extra-domestic standards.

What is noticeable in Nigella Lawson’s writing and television shows is that cooking and caring has been divorced from the ‘for him’ yet remains closely associated with motherhood. Her children feature frequently in her television shows, where they eat some of her creations, sometimes join in the cooking and participate in constructing the Nigella lifestyle of the middle class working mother. Cooking as a means of performing

motherhood by both feeding children and socializing them into culinary competence is also integral to her books. Despite the fact that much of her output demonstrates the ‘Nigella lifestyle’, in her writing, her husband, John Diamond, is rarely mentioned and his fleeting appearances in the television shows portray him as father, dinner party co-host and occasional cook, rather than eater. Given the amount of press coverage given to John Diamond’s cancer which made it difficult to eat, and subsequent death, many of Nigella’s audience will have been aware that there was no ‘him’ to cook for.^{xiv} For these reasons, the roles of ‘mother’ and ‘wife’ become largely divorced. As a result, ‘the caring self’ produced within Lawson’s work embodies the same contradictions as ‘the caring self’ produced by feminist criticism on cooking as domestic labour. As Daniel Miller argues, ‘It is noticeable that for all the critique of normative marriage implied by Devault there is very little attempt by her to challenge a mother’s love.’ (1998: 98) In this way, Lawson’s post-feminist cooking reproduces some of the tensions found in feminist critiques of cooking.

In many ways, Nigella Lawson’s cookery writing with its emphasis on extracting pleasure where possible from the cooking process sits easily within frameworks established for understanding the aesthetic dispositions of the new middle classes. Cooking practices are presented as ‘aestheticized leisure activities’ (Lupton 1996: 126) and part of a wider lifestyle based around ‘a morality of pleasure as duty’ which ‘makes it a failure, a threat to self-esteem, not to “have fun”.’ (Bourdieu 1984: 367). This can be understood within the context of what Featherstone calls the ‘aestheticization of everyday life’ (1991a) which is capitalized upon by the new middle classes as they invest in the art

of lifestyle. For Featherstone, 'the new heroes of consumer culture make lifestyle a life project... the modern individual in consumer culture is made conscious that he speaks not only with his clothes, but with his home, furnishings, car and other activities' including, presumably cooking and eating (1991a: 86). These 'new heroes' appear as masculine in Featherstone's account (Lury 1996: 148) and this begs the question of what happens to this conception of the new middle classes when gender is made a structuring form of differentiation rather than remaining implicit (see Hollows 2002). On one hand, there would appear to be nothing particularly 'new' about middle class (and non-middle class) women's responsibility for using the domestic sphere as a site for aesthetic display in which class tastes are both constructed and reproduced (see, for example, Sparke 1995 and Attfield 1995). Furthermore, taking a 'heroic' disposition towards everyday life is problematic for women as they have traditionally been associated with a conception of 'everyday life' as 'mundane' and 'non-heroic' (Felski 2000).

On the other hand, the home as a site of for the practice of a 'morality' of pleasure and play is problematized for women for whom it has been traditionally seen as a site of labour, and for the performance of a morality of 'respectability' through which women are judged as to whether they are 'appropriately' feminine (see Skeggs 1997). The following section explores further how the position of the domestic goddess may respond to middle class women's experience of the home as both a site of domestic labour and 'leisure-work'. Furthermore, this problematizes the extent to which women among the new middle classes share an ethic of 'calculating hedonism' in the same ways as middle class men. Lupton notes how this has

spatial and temporal dimensions: the workplace, the working day and the working week are characterized by production and aesthetic self-discipline, while the evening, the weekend, the holiday and festival days, the home and public spaces such as shopping malls, pubs, bars, and restaurants are the times and spaces within which consumption and hedonistic indulgence take place. (1996: 151)

If the home is both a site of labour and leisure, it is neither temporally nor spatially divorced from sites of production and discipline. It is these issues that are developed in the next section which examines how a relationship between time and domesticity is negotiated in Nigella Lawson's construction of a post-feminist cook.

Between Sophia Loren and Debbie Reynolds: Nostalgia, Time and Fantasy

Much of the press coverage that surrounded the publication of Domestic Goddess suggested that the book was a manifesto for Stepford Wives, part of a 'recidivist trend' in which 'housework was the new sex' (Gordon 2000) and had 'an unreconstructed housewife agenda' (Burnside 2000: 16). Charlotte Raven in The Guardian claimed that Nigella Lawson had produced 'a heritage park impression of housewifery' and was baffled by 'Nigella's apparent conviction that the only problem with domestic servitude was the time it took to perfect. Her nostalgia for the side-effects of female oppression – that atmospheric fug in the kitchen – would be offensive if it wasn't so curious.' (2000: 5) Likewise, Moore in the Daily Mail argued that the book represented nostalgia 'for a simpler time when men earned the dough and women stayed home kneading it' was a product of 'anxiety about changing gender relations' (2000: 31). While the book did find

a more positive reception among some journalists, in comments like the ones above, the journalist takes on the identity ‘feminist’ in opposition to the position of ‘the housewife’. Instead, I want to suggest that an identification with the position of the ‘domestic goddess’ negotiates the opposition between the feminist and the housewife by being offered as a position that is only available in fantasy, in Nigella Lawson’s words ‘not being a domestic goddess exactly, but feeling like one’. (2000: vii).

Before proceeding to examine more closely what is at stake in the desire to ‘feel like a domestic goddess’, it is worth addressing this issue of nostalgia. While a nostalgia for an imagined ‘golden age’ is frequently apparent in popular commentary that bemoans the decline of the ‘family meal’ (Murcott 1997) and the replacement of a living tradition of ‘authentic home-cooking’ with an ‘inauthentic’ system of industrial mass production of food (Laudan 1999), nostalgia is also evident in more academic work on women and cooking. While one dominant trend in feminist scholarship identified earlier is to situate cooking and feeding work within debates about domestic labour, another trend has been to celebrate feminine kitchen cultures. However, this celebration is situated within a narrative of cultural and culinary decline which rests on a nostalgia for a simpler time before commerce interfered too much with cooking, a kind of feminist version of what Laudan (1999) has called ‘culinary Luddism’.

For example, the French sociologist Luce Giard, while seeking to validate the practice of ‘doing cooking’ and its role in women’s culture, also employs a narrative of cultural

decline that employs some of the tropes of mass culture theory. The skilled and inventive female cook of yore, she argues, is being transformed into an ‘unskilled spectator who watches the machine function in her place.’ (1998: 212). Although Giard warns of the dangers of ‘archaistic nostalgia’ (1998: 213), her culturalist analysis nonetheless rests on a distinction between an ‘authentic’ popular culture reproduced in a living tradition of women’s culture and an ‘inauthentic’ mass-produced and industrialized culture that is produced for women rather than by them. Another example is offered in Mary Drake McFeeley’s (2001) history of American women’s kitchen cultures is fuelled by what Bourdieu has called a ‘populist nostalgia’ (1984: 58), in which a Missouri farming community of the 1920s represents ‘the world we have lost’. For Drake McFeeley, the 1950s represents a nadir in women’s culinary history, a time when the creative and productive housewife in a living kitchen culture was replaced by a deskilled housewife-consumer, marooned in a kitchen where she prepared homogeneous and standardized dishes ‘handed down, not from Great-grandmother, but from General Foods.’ (2001: 99) While Drake McFeeley’s liberal feminism means that she ends on a rather more optimistic note than Giard when she claims that ‘we do not need to lose our kitchens to keep our freedom’ (2001: 169), both critics share a feminist ‘culinary Luddism’ in their nostalgia for a time before capitalist rationalization destroyed a living tradition of feminine culinary culture. For these critics, the modern is presented as ‘an alien, external force bearing down on an organic community of the disempowered’ and, in the process, they tend to ignore the multiple ways ‘the modern becomes real at the most intimate and mundane levels of experience and interaction.’ (Felski 2000: 66)

While press commentary that drew on feminist discourses to criticize Domestic Goddess equated a nostalgic view of the kitchen, and women's place in it, with pre-feminism, both Drake McFeeley and Giard seek to celebrate and validate a pre-feminist feminine practice located in a world 'outside' capitalist industrialization. What I want to suggest is that Domestic Goddess negotiates a space between these oppositions. In the preface, Lawson claims that 'baking stands as a useful metaphor for the familial warmth of the kitchen we fondly imagine used to exist, and as a way of reclaiming our lost Eden.' (2000: vii) While the negative criticism of the book in the British press frequently swooped on the phrase 'lost Eden' as indicative of a pre-feminist 1950s, instead it could also be read as mythical place, somewhere we 'imagine' existed, rather than a literal past, positive or negative. In the process, Lawson refuses the fantasies of the past upon which feminism itself depends, creating in its place, an alternative fantastic space which acknowledges that is a fantasy.

Likewise, the position of the domestic goddess presented by Lawson is not simply a pre-feminist figure of femininity, a throwback to a 'real' past, but instead offers a point of feminine identification that responds to the contradictions of the present. The position of the domestic goddess is presented as an imagined and unfixed position, 'a fond, if ironic, dream: the unexpressed "I" that is a cross between Sophia Loren and Debbie Reynolds in pink cashmere cardigan and fetching gingham pinny' (2000: vii). In this way, criticisms of the 'unreality' of the domestic goddess miss the point that 'textual constructions of possible modes of femininity... do not function as role models but are symbolic realizations of feminine subject positions with which viewers can identify in fantasy.' (Ang 1990: 83) The clarification Nigella Lawson makes in the Preface is significant

here: she is not offering guidance on how to be, but how to feel like a domestic goddess. In Watching Dallas, Ien Ang argues that fantasy offers the opportunity to experience feminine identities ‘without having to experience their actual consequences’ (1985: 134). While feeling like a domestic goddess does translate into practice, it is a practice, like S&M, that is engaged in at a fantasy level: ‘The good thing is that we don’t have to get ourselves up in Little Lady drag and we don’t have to renounce the world and enter into a life of domestic drudgery.’ (Lawson 2000: vii)

Ang’s work is useful here because it points to the ways in which fantasy enables us to experiment with identities that ‘the structural constraints of everyday life’ (1990: 84) might prohibit while also reminding us that such fantasies are necessary ‘no one subject position can ever cover satisfactorily all the problems and desires an individual encounters.’ (1990: 85) In what follows, I suggest that the key ‘structural constraint’ that the fantasy of the domestic goddess addresses is time scarcity. If Campbell sees the new domesticity as ‘perversely time-consuming’ (2001: 4), then I want to examine what is at stake in this perversity.

Time scarcity is seen to be acutely felt by women as they engage in paid work while the domestic division of labour proves relatively resistant to change. Not only does this result in a need for ‘multi-tasking’ but women may also find it more difficult than men to organize their time effectively because there is always the risk of interruption from competing domestic responsibilities and the demands of others (Southerton, Shove and Warde 2001: 9). While this may not seem class-specific, it may well be experienced as

such: because the ‘work’ of consumption and leisure is crucial to new middle class identities, this is seen to produce a pressure on ‘free time’. As a result, the increased use of paid domestic labour by the middle class in the UK can be seen as a means of creating time to concentrate on the more ‘pleasant’ and ‘creative’ elements of domestic life which make a more significant contribution to maintaining distinctive and distinguished lifestyles. (Bell forthcoming and Gregson and Lowe 1995) An alternative response can be seen in the desire to escape the demands of both work and play to create ‘more time’ through downshifting (Southerton et al 2001). However, both these responses can be seen in relation to an increased sense of ‘harriedness’. This creates a pressure to create what Gary Alan Fine, in a different context, describes as ‘temporal autonomy’ through the creation of ‘temporal niches’, an attempt to control time ‘in the face of uncontrollable and unpredictable durations and tempos.’ (1996: 55)

For this reason, it is perhaps not surprising that the first episode of Nigella Bites was on ‘Fast Food’ with an emphasis on ‘minimum effort for maximum pleasure’. But, as Lawson points out in How to Eat, producing something to eat on a daily basis is not straightforward when ‘we have less time for cooking as we have more interest in food.’ (1999: 178) Furthermore, she claims that the entry of more women into paid employment means that the problem of producing a meal (for either men or women) is now faced at the end of a day working outside the home, a problem that doesn’t just involve the cooking process but the other elements such as shopping which go into what DeVault calls ‘feeding work’. Inviting friends for a mid-week dinner, Nigella claims in her TV series, seems like ‘a great idea – and then, as the day dawns, you really begin to panic

about you're going to do the shopping, the cooking, the lot. I have an answer cos we've all been there.'^{xv} Everyday cooking is therefore presented as something that must negotiate the contradictory demands of care and convenience. (Warde 1997). While the need to negotiate the opposition between care and convenience is not new, this contemporary sense of being harried may not simply be about a shortage of time but, more generally, a changing experience of time itself as the need to organize and manage time becomes more important, as 'scheduling strategies', once features of an industrialized public sphere, have become part of everyday life (Warde 1999: 524). In this context, the fragmented images of activities which comprise the Nigella lifestyle which are interspersed between cooking sequences can begin to look like a visual illustration of the need to order 'work appointments, physical exercise, journeying to the shops, transporting children, using leisure facilities and visiting friends [which] require complex and anxiety provoking organization.' (Warde, 1999: 523)

Within such a context, Nigella Lawson's call to cake-baking can appear at first as rather ridiculous. However, some studies suggest that the contemporary middle classes' experience of time may also involve scheduling 'quality time' which is outside of both paid labour and the less pleasant aspects of unpaid domestic labour (tasks which can become carried out by paid domestic labour)(Gregson and Lowe 1995: 159). Cooking in quality time can, therefore, be contrasted with, and in some senses bracketed off from, everyday cooking and, in Domestic Goddess, these are equated with different modes of femininity. As Lawson argues, modern cookery has produced a

mood... of skin-of-the-teeth efficiency, all briskness and little pleasure.

Sometimes that's the best we can manage, but at other times we don't want to feel like a post-modern, post-feminist, overstretched woman but, rather, a domestic goddess trailing nutmeggy fumes of baking pie in our languorous wake. (2000: vii).

If, as Hilary Radner has argued, the pleasure of spending money on make-up is 'precisely because it is excessive, without any "real" purpose' (1989: 311), then when time is a scarce commodity for the new middle classes, it is the excessive expenditure of time on baking a loaf or making bagels that offers one source of pleasure. This also explains why cooking like a domestic goddess for Lawson takes place in time opposed to the rhythms of the (masculine) professional workplace where 'chefs and their minions have to conjure up the finished dish within minutes.' (1999: 178)

Richard Dyer has explored how some forms of popular entertainment contain five different types of 'utopian possibilities' which offer the sense of what 'utopia would feel like rather than how it would be organized'. (1985: 222; see also, Geraghty 1991) These respond to 'particular inadequacies in society' (227) as they are experienced at particular historical moments. For example, Dyer argues, entertainment may offer the sense of what material abundance would feel like as a response to the experience of material scarcity. I would suggest that Nigella Lawson's work offers the sense of what temporal abundance might feel like as a response to feeling of hurriedness and time scarcity. However, in the figure of the domestic goddess, two further 'utopian solutions' discussed by Dyer overlap with the promise of temporal abundance. First, she offers the sense of an 'energy' that

arises when work and play are ‘synonymous’ which responds to feelings of exhaustion and second, feelings of ‘intensity’, ‘the affectivity of living in response to the “dreariness” and “instrumentality” of the daily round’ (Dyer 1985: 228). While Lawson’s work acknowledges and offers sympathetic advice on dealing with these structural constraints, in the figure of the domestic goddess three possible utopian possibilities coalesce to offer her readers the experience of what life would feel like outside them.^{xvi}

If the meaning of cooking is ‘in the process’ rather than the end product (Lawson 2001: 99), then these meanings are not necessarily gender-specific. Indeed, studies suggest that men who enjoy cooking are more likely to take responsibility for preparing labour-intensive ‘special occasion’ meals than for everyday family meals (see, for example, Charles and Kerr 1988; Kemmer 1999; and Lupton 1996). User comments and reviews on Amazon.com and Amazon.co.uk also suggest that it is not only women who use her books and the position of the ‘domestic goddess’ is undoubtedly open to men.

Nonetheless, the figure of the domestic goddess is not only literally a gendered figure, it is also used to validate feminine practices and ‘traditions’ to produce a homology between cooking, eating, reading and femininity based around ideas of comfort. While Lawson is careful not to invoke a nostalgia for a ‘real’ rose-tinted past, she nonetheless uses the relationship between food and (real and imagined) memories to suggest the emotional components of both cooking and eating as a source of social and psychological sustenance. The memories and histories drawn on here are less a nostalgia for a previous epoch of domestic culture and more micronarratives of matrilineal relations in which both lived or imagined experiences are intertwined with emotions that are a source of comfort

in the present. As Lupton argues, 'Preparing a meal may evoke memories of past events at which that meal has been prepared and eaten, conjuring up the emotions felt at that time, or the experience may look forward to the sharing of the meal with another, anticipating an emotional outcome.' (1996: 32) It is in both the cooking and the eating of roast chicken that Nigella Lawson draws on her mother's practices and childhood memories to produce food that 'to me, smells of home, of family, of food that carries some important extra-culinary weight.' (1999: 8) But these do not need to be recreations of the past but a means of connecting with the past and producing new memories of comfort through practice. For example, in a discussion of whitebait which Lawson recalls as 'the restaurant starter' in her childhood, the memories are neither of eating nor home-cooking. As she recollects, 'I didn't eat it then, but my father and sister, Thomasina, always ordered it, and it is partly in her memory, and with the wish that she was still here to eat it, that I present it to you now.' (2001: 158)

However, memory and tradition are not offered as a basis for simply recreating the past in the present. As Felski argues, 'even as they bear witness to the otherness of the past, traditions are always dynamic, unstable and impure.' (2000: 70) On one hand, Lawson calls for a need to respect the 'legacy' she inherits from female relations and authors who act as culinary maternal figures. However, on the other hand, she refuses the passivity that comes from reproducing both feminine and familial tradition. There is an acknowledgement here that not all the emotions surrounding food and cooking are positive: for example, 'Christmas can induce panic and depression' (1999: 55) when tradition can become 'a source of pressure rather than pleasure' (2000: 247). Instead,

Nigella advocates a more reflexive and active relationship to tradition: ‘you can decide which rituals and ceremonies you want to adopt to give shape to your life and which you want to lose because they just constrain you... I’ve consciously enjoyed setting my own pattern here’ (2000: 247). In this way, the domestic goddess is freed from the ‘real’ force of tradition and the modes of feminine labour, self-sacrifice and obligation associated with it: tradition is presented as a choice.

However, this does not lead to an invalidation of feminine histories and maternal influences. Lawson also takes the opportunity to not only recreate recipes from her forebears but also to reflect on the practice of compiling recipes as an everyday feminine tradition. Family cookbooks are compared to photograph albums and the episode of Nigella Bites dealing with dishes from her childhood is intercut with old photographs of family members.^{xvii} For example, Granny Lawson’s Lunch Dish is not presented in terms of memories of cooking and eating but in terms of memories embedded in the material culture of cooking. The source of the dish is her grandmother’s ‘old battered cookery note-books’ which operate as ‘domestic diaries, half-filled with recipes torn out of papers, the rest a handwritten mixture of tips passed on by friends or accounts of lunches served to them. Cooking isn’t just about ingredients, weights and measures: its social history, personal history.’ (2001: 162) For Janet Theophano, such books are not only the products of those elements of the private sphere where women have been able to wield authority, they were also acted as a form of property that women could bequeath to other women. (2002: 86) Furthermore, ‘The traces women left behind in cookbooks anchored their contemporary relationships to the pages of their books and also connected the living

with the dead.’ (2002: 115) The encouragement to maintain this practice is built into Nigella Bites where pages are left for notes (although more cynically this could be seen as a form of padding in what is a relatively slight collection). The aim, Lawson suggests, is to create a space for responses to her recipes, so there is a form of ‘conversation’ rather than a ‘monologue’. In the process, her books become not only part of a more ‘official’ history of cookbooks but records of multiple microhistories that are written as the books are used.

In this way, the figure of the domestic goddess not only offers a point of identification in fantasy, but she is also positioned within a fantasy scenario in which maternal relations between women offer a source of comfort. While this might suggest a psychoanalytic reading drawing on Chodorow’s (1978) work about the relationships between mothers and daughters, this is at odds with the specific construction of the domestic goddess as a historicized figure of middle class femininity. A more useful way of understanding the ways in which fantasy operates in the relations between women that are established within Domestic Goddess is offered by Cora Kaplan who draws on the observation made by Laplanche and Pontalis that ‘Fantasy is not the object of desire, but its setting.’ (cited in Kaplan 1986: 150) Kaplan examines the ways in which fantasy doesn’t simply work to confirm subjectivities but allows the exploration of what multiple subjectivities might feel like by allowing us to move between them. In this way, the fantasy scenarios constructed between domestic goddesses allow the reader the pleasures of moving between the positions of the mother and the mothered and the uses of this fantasy need not be gender-specific.

This discussion has aimed to highlight the ways in which the figure of the domestic goddess offers a form of identification inscribed in a textual fantasy which can translate into practice. The figure of the domestic goddess allows women to deal with ‘specific forms of psychical and emotional satisfaction and dissatisfaction, and specific ways of dealing with conflicts and dilemmas.’ (Ang 1990: 83) In particular, it offers a retreat from complexities of time-management and scarcity and from juggling roles, in the process offering the potential for feeling of comfort and security that, while not located in an idealized ‘real’ past, are nonetheless connected with ‘real’ and imagined feminine figures and scenarios that maintain a sense of tradition. As with the pleasures of investing in make-up, an investment in taking time to enjoy the pleasures of cooking appears to do little to disturb the traditional contours of femininity. Yet, in a post-feminist landscape in which it is often manifest that contemporary femininity is multiple and complex, the desire to temporarily inhabit a figure of femininity which appears stable, which is of another time (literal or mythical) in which things seem simpler and less contradictory than the present, can also appear to offer a sense of escape from the pressures of managing and ordering both everyday life and feminine selves.

‘I Choose My Choice’: Post-Feminism, Middle-class Femininity, Domesticity

In an episode from Sex and the City^{xviii}, Charlotte tells her three single friends that she is thinking of giving up her job in a gallery to create enough time for the other interests she

wants to pursue: having a baby, taking an Indian cookery class, learning pottery and doing volunteer work in a paediatric AIDS ward. The single girls look distraught and pour scorn on the idea of becoming ‘one of those women we hate’ who quit their jobs once they get married. Perturbed by their response, Charlotte phones Miranda, the character most closely identified with the figure of the ‘career woman’, early the following morning to ask her to stop being judgmental and to get behind her choice.

The Women’s Movement is supposed to be about choice and if I choose to quit my job, that’s my choice (...) Its my life and its my choice (...) I am behind my choice (...) I choose my choice. I choose my choice.

The episode provides a useful dramatization of the ways in which femininity for the new middle-classes can be inhabited as a choice in which not only are certain modes of femininity embraced but, in the process, others are also refused. It also demonstrates that these choices are far from straightforward. And, at the end of the episode, we see career woman Miranda playing hookie from her job in a law firm on the sofa watching a cookery show on TV, enjoying a bit of her domesticated ‘other’. Carrie’s voiceover tell us ‘And, for the first time in her life, Miranda learned the joys of cooking and of not working. Of course, she’d have to back eventually, just to prove Charlotte wrong.’

Charlotte’s comments provide a valuable illustration of how rhetorics of feminism, contemporary femininity and middle classness are articulated around ideas of choice (although, at the same time, Charlotte’s increasingly hysterical assertions of ‘I choose my choice’ allows the show to also undercut these ideas, suggesting that the compulsion to make a choice constitutes a lack of choice). Commenting on the work of Marilyn

Strathern, Skeggs observes how ‘the middle class continually have to make choices, of viewpoints, of resources, of what to attach to themselves.’ (forthcoming) The idea that there are ‘no rules, only choices’ that has been associated with the new middle classes (see, for example, Featherstone 1991a) also coincides with what some feminist critics have seen as a brand of ‘popular individualistic feminism’ that emerged in the 1980s which served to cement a relationship between feminism and middle-class privilege (Skeggs 1997: 153). For Probyn, writing about US television shows of the same period, class and gender are articulated in ‘a new age of “choiceoisie”’ which is part of a wider post-feminist landscape (1990: 152)

The commentary surrounding the publication of Domestic Goddess, like the discussions between Carrie and her friends, was also couched in terms of choice. Some commentators demonized Nigella Lawson in the name of ‘feminism’: as Gillian Glover asked, ‘didn’t Marilyn French, Erica Jong and Germain Greer free us from our need to please the genie of the Fairy Liquid bottle?’ (2000: 9) Such comments frequently assumed a straightforward choice between feminism and domestic femininity in which feminism could be the only ‘rational’ response: ‘Could it be that the real reason women hate baking is because cake-baking epitomizes our status as domestic slaves? Most men secretly love the ideas of a Stepford Wife, programmed to eager servitude, be it sex or baking.’ (Tyrer 2000: 47) Burnside sneered that ‘For women who have given up career jobs to make packed lunches and sew Tweenie costumes, Domestic Goddess was ‘affirming stuff’ (2000: 16). However, she also acknowledged that this was not simply about a choice between the identities of feminist and domestic goddess, but about the inability of most

women to be able to choose between, or effortlessly combine, family and work, as they lacked Nigella's privileged background. Likewise, Raven suggested that Nigella peddled a fantasy that women didn't need to choose and could 'have it all': 'the fear of choosing one thing at the expense of the other is soothed by the subtextual message that ambition does not preclude the domestic idyll they all yearn for.' (2000: 5)

These reading of Domestic Goddess are obviously at odds with the one I have made above. My point in rehearsing them here is less to criticize them and more to demonstrate the extent to which they, like Nigella and like the women in Sex and the City, also constitute a wider landscape in which middle class femininities are seen as a product of choices between femininities, 'in which feminism itself is bound up with the discourse of choice' (Probyn 1993: 284) Choices are offered between feminism and domesticity, between workplace and family, between paid work and domestic labour, between 'work-work' and 'leisure-work'. These 'discourses of choice construct positions for women – they place us in relation to other discourses and in relation to our everyday lives.' (Probyn 1993: 282) While, as Skeggs (forthcoming) rightly points out, this 'begs the question of what about those who have no choice?', it also suggests that the 'no rules, only choices' mentality that is supposed to be characteristic of the new middle classes, is rather more fraught for women when 'having it all' is constituted within the popular as yet a further, compromised and problematic choice.

These representations of choice on one hand, not only serve to denaturalize modes of femininity (including 'feminist femininities'), but also gesture to the ways in which

femininities are cross-cut by class. However, on the other hand, they do far more than this. Probyn's analysis of choice is useful because it highlights the ways in which representations of choice are not simply about the opportunity to change our lives but may more modestly simply allow us to 'feel differently'. For Probyn, it is necessary to analyze 'the affective implications of the images of choice as they circulate within the material structure of our lives.' (1993: 283) It is here that 'feeling like a domestic goddess' may offer rather more than a compensation for living in the present. The representation of a mode of femininity that is based around cooking and eating as pleasure, rather than servitude and denial, may begin to offer a way of experiencing cooking and eating differently. It also provides an alternative means of representing women's relationship to food to that offered by (some very good) feminist criticism. Furthermore, for this author at least, while there are times when I want to feel 'like a feminist', there are other times when I really do want to feel 'like a domestic goddess' (and seemingly, I am not alone in this, see Campbell 2001: 5). While I have no wish to offer my own fantasies as a prescription for anything, 'this rearrangement of the feel of the material' (Probyn 1993: 283) enables one way of experiencing what it would feel like to live between the dichotomies upon which feminist authority frequently depends.

Alison Light has argued that fantasy allows us to explore 'desires which may be in excess of the socially possible or acceptable' (1984: 7). This suggests that, while the social and cultural constraints which the fantasy of being a domestic goddess addresses are important, so are judgements of taste about 'acceptable' and 'unacceptable' femininities. As Sara Thornton argues, 'Distinctions are never just assertions of equal difference; they

usually entail some claim to authority and presume the inferiority of others.' (1995: 10)

Within the popular, versions of feminism do have an impact on constructions of cultural distinctions between femininities and, like the more 'official' feminisms of second-wave feminism, they sometimes suggest that it is our duty to make a choice. The morally charged judgements against Charlotte's decision to make pots and have a baby, like the vilification of Nigella in some portions of the British press, suggests that the 'choice' between femininities is not straightforward but bound up within a series of moral 'rules', feminist and otherwise.

ⁱ Indeed, of the kind people who discussed this with me, many commented on what I was going to do about her 'beauty', and the implications this had in terms of her representation of anxiety and her own eating on the one hand, and her relationship to a sizeable heterosexual male fan base on the other. These remain issues to address but remain beyond the scope of this article.

ⁱⁱ See, for example, the trailer for Channel 4's Does Doug Know? in which Daisy Donovan flirts mercilessly with the camera in the style of Nigella and BBC1's Alistair McGowan's Big Impression where a hassled Nigella 'prepares' Mars Bars as a pudding for her children ('I prefer to open them with my teeth').

ⁱⁱⁱ I am grateful to one of the readers on this article for these comments. It should also be noted that there is far less emphasis on Nigella as working mother and far more emphasis on a leisured lifestyle in Forever Summer.

^{iv} All from Nigella Bites, episode 1, 'Fast Food'.

^v Nigella Bites, episode 1, 'Fast Food'

^{vi} Nigella Bites, episode 3, ‘Family’

^{vii} Nigella Bites, episode 1, ‘Fast Food’

^{viii} Nigella Bites, episode 2, ‘Entertaining’

^{ix} Nigella Bites, episode 1, ‘Fast Food’

^x And indeed Nigella introduces us to her own very solitary pleasure in fried pig’s ear that no-one else will eat (Nigella Bites, episode 4, ‘Home Alone’)

^{xi} It is interesting to note that in Garry Marshall’s Runaway Bride (1999), Maggie Carpenter (Julia Roberts) only deems herself ready to marry once she stops eating her eggs in whatever style her current man favours and does a tasting session to discover her own preferences.

^{xii} This reference to the lab can be seen as a way in which Nigella Lawson’s approach to cooking is not only distinguished from a tradition of domestic science on one hand and industrial food production on the other, but also from the hyper-scientific approach to cookery associated with figures such as the chef and contributor to The Guardian, Heston Blumenthal.

^{xiii} Nigella Bites II, episode 6, ‘Legacy’

^{xiv} While this changes in Forever Summer when Charles Saatchi is introduced, the emphasis in this series, as befits the new couple, is largely on eating with friends rather than everyday domestic cookery.

^{xv} Nigella Bites, episode 1, ‘Fast Food’

^{xvi} The importance of fantasy is also employed in her later work when the reader is invited to act as if it could be Forever Summer. As Lawson explains, ‘Summer, then, is an idea, a memory, a hopeful projection. Sometimes when it’s grey outside and cold

within, we need to conjure up the sun, some light, a lazy feeling of having all the wide-skied time in the world to sit back and eat warmly with friends.’ (2002: vii) Furthermore, cooking is something that can be done both ‘in lieu of travelling’ and as a means of evoking a memory of past travels, a means of acting as if we were temporarily in another country (p. 76). In the television series, Nigella compares the pleasure she takes from the displays in a British Italian deli to those she has experienced in European markets. In this way, Nigella again employs a means of using cooking to play with time and to create a sense of leisured time that is associated with holidays. This is accentuated in the television series where much of the cooking is taken out into the garden or relocated to the kitchen of a sea-side holiday home. In this way, summer cooking becomes associated with both a time and a space that is presented as a holiday from the demands of everyday domestic cookery.

^{xvii} Nigella Bites II, episode 6, ‘Legacy’

^{xviii} Episode 55, ‘Time and Punishment’.

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