*From ‘Cookery in Colour’ to ‘The Great British Bake Off’: Shifting Gendered Accounts of Home-Baking and Domesticity*

Abstract

This paper offers a feminist reading of home-baking. It explores the shifting ways in which baking has variously been bound up with a variety of normative values, such as familial ‘togetherness’, care, patriotism, thrift and display. The paper draws on a range of historical examples, from the patriotic virtues of home-baking extolled via British war-time propaganda, and the ‘wholesome, simple and economical’ post-war *Bero* baking recipes; through to the renewed emphasis on display and baking as interwoven with new consumer cultures in the best-selling 1960s recipe book *Cooking in Colour*. The paper goes on to explore contemporary representations of baking as ‘fun’ rather than as work. Drawing on the popular British television baking show *The Great British Bake Off*, the paper considers how historical associations of baking with thrift, competition and ‘betterment’ are repackaged as cosy and nostalgic via a hyper-real reflection of the past. In-keeping with neo-liberal assumptions about the meritocratic and ‘life-changing’ potential of reality TV, the paper argues that *The Great British Bake Off* offers viewers a ‘high-consuming ideal’. The paper examines how via the medium of home baking, the show reinforces both neo-liberal myths of individuals as agents of their own successes, and also normative assumptions of self-transformation via consumption and commercialization (Ringrose and Walkerdine, 2008). The paper concludes by arguing that *The Great British Bake Off* offers a version of baking that is both ‘hyper-domestic’ and a type of ‘post-feminist homemaking’, whereby feminist discourses of choice and equality are entangled with highly conventional modes of domesticity.

Introduction

This paper explores shifting gendered representations of home-baking. It draws on three historic and contemporary examples of popular representations of home-baking. Firstly, it explores the *Bero* baking recipe book first published in the UK in the 1930s; secondly the bestselling 1960s baking and cookery book *Cookery in Colour*; and thirdly, the popular BBC ‘reality’ baking show *The Great British Bake Off*. Each of these examples is characterized by broad commercial success and popular appeal, and each reflects and occurs within key historical transitory moments in women’s lives. The paper will offer a reflexive account of the reproduction and re-making of gender within each example. It locates domesticity firmly within modernity, demonstrating that everyday practices and domestic routines shift and transform alongside the unfolding of modernity. By doing so, the paper offers a counter-argument to the historic dismissal of domesticity and in particular the ‘retreat’ to domesticity in the 1950s as the depoliticized, ‘poor relation’ to modernity (see also Giles, 2004 and Casey and Martens, 2007). The paper warns against assuming a simple post-war ‘shift’ for women from the public to the private, and instead points to the growing significance of the re-negotiation of conflicting feminine identities and modernity (see also Moseley, 2008).

As Judy Giles argues, ‘responses to the modern’ are also to be found played out in private, at home spaces (cited in Moseley, 2008: 25), and frequently within symbolic meanings of everyday consumption (Warde, 2009). Warde argues that the late twentieth century is characterized by an intensification of the process of the attribution of identity to various cultural forms, including the establishing of set criteria for judging ‘quality’. In this paper, I consider the usefulness of this perspective for examining the changing popular representations of home-baking by relating these to significant historical moments whereby consumption became increasingly stylized and where we witness a ‘process of proliferation of principles for discriminating between a growing variety of culinary alternatives’ (p.152). Utilising Bourdieu’s account of culture and identity, Warde identifies culture as the meeting point between economic exchange and symbolic identification. In this paper, I argue that this approach is useful for exploring the changing symbolic meaning of food and in particular the transformations in its visualdisplay. However, I will also argue that the symbolic meanings of home baking are markedly *gendered* and not straightforwardly classed. Beetham (2008) for example, demonstrates that food preparation throughout the twentieth century was a key means of recreating middle-class femininity, and women were ‘assisted’ with this in various ways, for example, via early advice manuals and later women’s magazines. Throughout Europe, men and women have experienced radically different relationships to food and meal preparation which has long been heavily gendered, such as the emergence of ‘afternoon tea’ as sustenance for women and children until men returned home from work in the early evening for the main meal of the day. Beetham turns to de Certeau’s ‘practice of everyday life’ theory to explain how the ‘relatively powerless’, ordinary and unremarked actors seek and adopt ways of ‘getting by’ and of formulating spaces and structures in order to achieve this. In this paper I explore the ways in which popular narratives of home baking facilitate paths through which women have negotiated powerful structural inequalities.

This paper will argue that via a range of popular televised and printed baking scenarios, new theoretical approaches to at-home baking can be advanced. Firstly, the paper will examine baking as expression of a ‘caring self’, via the *Bero* recipe book that advocated the thrifty, economic and health benefits of home-baking, not only for the family, but also as part of the ‘patriotic’ good. Secondly, the paper explores *Cookery in Colour* as a new high-consuming ideal of baking as ‘display’. It considers the success of the book alongside the post-war consolidation of pervasive visual cultures and will examine ways in which baking was utilized by women as a means of developing an enterprising ‘at-home’ self. Third, and finally, the paper explores the popular BBC televised baking show *The Great British Bake Off*. It will consider the contemporary relationships between home-baking and the early 21st century re-scripting of femininity. In particular, it will consider how *The Great British Bake Off* advocates neo-liberal and post-feminist ideals of choice, personal pleasure and consumption (McRobbie, 2009; Winch, 2013), while simultaneously reproducing norms of baking and domesticity especially self-care, personal responsibility and a renewed focus on ‘self-improvement’. I will conclude by arguing that popular representations of baking throughout the twentieth and early twenty first century have offered women a means of dealing with the structural affects of modernity, and anxieties surrounding the entrenchment of neo-liberal ideologies. The paper prioritises women as active agents *within*, rather than passive receptors *of* popular baking cultures.

“Good Housekeeping”: *Bero* and Baking for Health

In this section, I begin to examine early twentieth century popular home baking advice and the emergence of new gendered identity practices. Even before the consolidation of mass consumption in the UK, cookery advice was leveled almost exclusively at women, and was frequently bound up with notions of patriotism, with baking and cooking more generally positioned as a key way through which women could contribute towards the ‘common good’. During World War Two, British propaganda was adopted in order to bolster these messages. In particular, the aim was to persuade women of their ‘duty’ as housewives; namely to employ skills of cooking alongside frugality and thrift within the limiting and challenging constraints of rationing. In the UK, the Foreign Office went to significant lengths to persuade women that their work as housewives was a crucial part of the overall war effort, with home cooking and baking extolled as essential skills and evidence of patriotism. A militaristic take on women’s role in the war effort featured a colour illustration of three women wearing aprons and hair scarves marching resolutely forward and carrying a banner emblazoned with the slogan ‘Up housewives and at ‘em’. In this particular campaign, housewives are also encouraged to save food scraps, bones and other household waste. The 1940s and 1950s saw significant shifts in terms of how women and women’s work and moreover women’s overall contribution to society was valued. As evidenced above, propaganda material promoted celebratory images of the thrifty housewife whose skills as careful money manager and resourceful homemaker recognized her as a key component of the war effort. This historical period represents one of the few moments where women’s unpaid labour is celebrated and acknowledged so enthusiastically.

Post-war baking books provide further insight into the social construction of baking and in particular how baking was bound up with notions of mothers facilitating familial health and wellbeing. Of particular note are the *Bero* baking guides which were distributed free of charge to housewives. *Bero* was founded in Newcastle-upon-Tyne by a small grocery firm which began to produce self-raising flour; at the time considered a novelty and luxury. In the 1920s, in a bid to make self-raising flour more popular to the general public, *Bero* took baked items such as scones, pastries and cakes to exhibitions across the UK. Following the success of the exhibitions, and an increased public demand from housewives for self-raising flour, *Bero* began to print and distribute without charge, copies of small booklets containing simple recipes and key tips for baking with self-raising flour. The booklets proved hugely popular, and are still published today, for a nominal charge of £2.99. The *Bero* baking book remains one of the best-selling cookery books of all time, with total sales in excess of thirty eight million.

One of the obvious intentions of the *Bero* baking books was to provide an education in home economics to young women. The early books feature pictures of girls in aprons standing by baking paraphernalia while they learn how to bake using the *Bero* baking book, and by bags of branded *Bero* self-raising flour which are always prevalent in the photos. In addition, the books’ covers feature pictures of young women invariably serving produce baked with *Bero* self-raising flour to their families. The *Bero* books centered around creating a desire for a produce which promised to make life easier for housewives who were frequently constrained not only through lack of financial resources, but also through the demands of baking with a range of relatively unsophisticated and pre-modern baking gadgets. The advertising campaign is a good example of early, highly successful branding and product placement. However, what their promotion campaign also achieved, was an embedding and reproduction of particular norms and values associated with motherhoods and femininities. The *Bero* baking books always contain a short preamble to the recipes. Interestingly, this preamble is rarely about baking *per se*, rather, it is almost always about the (woman) baker to whom the book speaks. Within these discourses, a range of associations are made between baking and the formation of respectable, ‘feminine’ identity practices. Many of these associations remain pertinent today, as I demonstrate below.

One of the most palpable representations of women within the *Bero* recipe books, is that of the symbolic woman reader, who through her formidable baking abilities simultaneously demonstrates her abilities as wife and mother. *Bero* recruited women and girls from the north east of England to feature on the cover of their booklets. Via these images, home baking is repeatedly represented as synonymous with ‘good’ mothering; with facilitating the health and happiness of the family. *Bero* constantly reminds its women readers that achieving this is something that they can take great pride in. Here ‘pride’ becomes a social emotion, with home baking being reproduced by *Bero* as interdependent to being an effective and worthy wife and mother. In the preamble to the seventeenth edition of the *Bero* baking book, readers are reminded of the relationships between baking and good mothering, with a feeling of ‘pride’ being the reward and ‘the right’ of the home baker:

‘There’s no more pleasing sight than that of a happy family around a well-stocked tea table, all enjoying their food; and the mother who is responsible for the good cooking, and who has prepared it with her own hands, *has every right* to survey the results of her culinary skill with *pride and satisfaction*.’

(*Bero* recipe book; seventeenth edition; italics mine)

*Bero* can be credited with generating some of the first mass produced images of the thrifty and economical housewife who uses her baking skills to preserve the financial wellbeing and health of the family. These enduring narratives of motherhood and femininity are reflected in a range of studies exploring twentieth century food practices and femininities (for example, DeVault, 1991). These studies have identified how the ability to successfully feed the family have long been associated with powerful social emotions of pride and satisfaction for women and conversely how an *inability* to adequately provide food and ‘care’ is concomitant with stigma, guilt and anxiety (eg. Casey, 2007; Casey and Martens, 2007; Casey and Taylor, 2015; Cohen, 1992; Garthwaite, 2016). Here, food production is described as a purely ‘selfless’ activity which off-sets any negative feelings of shame and guilt and a feeling of not doing the ‘job’ of mothering adequately (see also Charles and Kerr’s (1988) classic study of women and food in the eighties). These feelings are especially heightened among working class women, for whom the ability to achieve the heightened standards of food production and family wellbeing as depicted in the *Bero* recipe books is always hindered by constraints of limited household finances. The working class women of Charles and Kerr’s study thus reported high feelings of pride and satisfaction when they felt they had been able to provide for and feed their families ‘properly’ in the way that they felt was expected of them. Moreover, central to the women’s narratives in Charles and Kerr’s study, were the likes and dislikes of the family which are described in great detail, and are always positioned as paramount in contrast to the women themselves who said that they would ‘eat anything’ (Charles and Kerr, 1988: 63).

However, feeding the family has always been more than simply a reaction to powerful notions of normative femininity. DeVault (1991) argues that food production becomes part of an aspiration towards a ‘caring self’ whereby the feminine self is defined alongside caring for others. The caring self is produced and reproduced alongside constant surveillance and assessment of women’s abilities to adequately occupy the caring self (DeVault, 1991). Baking is thus seen as an expression of love and care where both class and gender are played out and judgements are made (see also Skeggs, 1997). As with Charles and Kerr’s earlier work, DeVault identifies the difficulties but also determination among working class women to make up money resources that they lacked in order that they might be able to care for their families to the ‘appropriate’ standards. Pahl (1989) offers a similar reflection of the demands and anxieties faced by working class women as they attempt to control a very limited household budget. *Bero*’s cookbooks tap into this notion of aspiring to care within an increasingly demanding climate of surveillance on women’s ability to demonstrate her performance of the caring self. The constant emphasis in the *Bero* books on home baking and prudent household budgeting – ‘It’s more economical too!’ – reinforces the dual demands of housewife as responsible for producing healthy, appetizing food while simultaneously managing a limited household budget. This dual demand was intensified by the rapid rise of mass produced images of idealized family units and housewives, as we have seen with the *Bero* recipe bookimages.Later on in the paper, I show how the 1990s onwards witnessed a rise of cooking and baking for *personal* pleasure; however prior to that, the popular representation of baking was one of personal pride and satisfaction through feeding the family, with very little or no emphasis on food as offering pleasure to the cook herself.

*Cookery in Colour*: ‘Display’ and Baking as Aspiration

In the previous section, I identified *Bero* as an example of baking as gendered. In particular, I explored baking as both part of the patriotic common good and also as key to demonstrating a ‘caring self’ simultaneously demonstrating sound cooking and baking proficiencies *and* good money management skills, both of which are positioned as tantamount to the wellbeing and happiness of the family. Thus, preserving the health of the family and maintaining economic prudence became the primary focus of home baking guides. In this section, I want to explore the ways in which representations of home baking developed alongside the rapid emergence of new consumer cultures. I argue that the late 1950s onwards, heralded a number of notable shifts in the language surrounding home baking and that these reflect wider political and cultural discourses of the time. I will focus on three key shifts; firstly, the growing importance of baking as presentationand *display*; secondly, the growing tendency to cook and bake for ‘occasions’ and entertaining; and thirdly, the growing association between baking as expression of aspiration, status and betterment.

In order to examine these key shifts, I will explore the bestselling cookery book *Cookery in Colour*, published in 1960 and edited by Marguerite Patten. Patten is credited with being the ‘first television chef’, with her cookery show premiering on the BBC in 1947. She also performed cookery demonstrations, most famously at the London Palladium and wrote several bestselling cookbooks. *Cookery in Colour* represents a range of important developments in the history of home baking and cooking. In particular, *Cookery in Colour* reflects the evolving post-war relationships between cookery, television and print materials. Bonner (2009) points out that although ‘multi-platforming’ (TV, radio, print materials) within the context of cookery shows is nothing new, the first TV cookery shows tended not to have associated print publications. Early ‘personality’ cooks like Patten later became prominent TV cooks, however, it was their extensive printed publications rather than TV or radio that provided their main source of income (Bonner, 2009). Cookbooks have long been commercially-focused as with the Bero cookbooks discussed earlier, but it isn’t until the 1960s that we start to see the beginnings of tentative connections between TV and cookery. During this time, TV cookery shows tended to follow a broadly formal and educational format, rather than being a form of ‘entertainment’. Over time, the relationship between television and print became increasingly inter-dependent and symbiotic as cookery books came to offer an ‘extension’ of the television show; viewers were thus able to extend their pleasure by purchasing the cookbook. However according to Bonner (2009) this shifting relationship was often an uneasy one with many early TV chefs uncomfortable with wider ‘publicity’. Thus, in *Cookery in Colour*, Patten is only marginally present. We learn a little about her in a short forward as she addresses her readers, but there are no direct references to her TV show. This conflicts with contemporary TV spin-off cookery books where the TV chef is omnipresent in multiple images of him/herself throughout the text, and where recipes are full of references to the show. Extra details about the personal life of the ‘celebrity’ chef are revealed and – crucially – the book shares its title with the TV show. The chef herself thus becomes part of the commercialized ‘product’ in addition to the recipes. Nevertheless, *Cookery in Colour* is connected to television in other ways; from the section on ‘TV dinners’, through to the prominence of the Technicolor illustrations, TV is firmly present throughout.

In contrast with the TV spin-off cookery books that came later, *Cookery in Colour* is huge – described as an ‘encyclopedia’ -containing over 2000 recipes, some of which are inspired, according to Patten by her ‘foreign trips’. The sheer variety and volume of recipes in *Cookery in Colour* stands in direct contrast to the short and simple *Bero* recipe books. By 1960, rationing in the UK had ended, and the country was becoming increasingly affluent, with high employment and a dramatic increase in the availability and variety of food available (Hilton, 2003). The rapid rise of branding, advertising and consumer culture during this time is echoed in the sheer abundance of food and recipes on display in *Cookery in Colour*,which to the reader in 1960 must have seemed spectacular in contrast to the austere and unexceptional baking guides that preceded it. Many of the recipes are for ‘showstopping’ centre pieces, making use of ‘exotic’ foods from around the world, for example, the ‘Pineapple Baskets’ and ‘Roman Boat’. Indeed, the real novelty of the book is reflected in its title; ‘colour’ is paramount, and alongside this, a recognition of the new importance of a new culture of *display*. By 1960, baking is depicted less as thrifty homemaking, and more as part of the expression of new identity practices that are embedded in consumer cultures (Marcuse, 1964) and in the conspicuous presentation of products at home. Thus, the introduction to *Cookery in Colour* focuses primarily on food as *display*:

‘The secret to successful cooking is that food should not only taste good but *look good* too. The many colour photographs show you just how this can be achieved and will tempt you to take pride in serving your dishes as attractively as possible.’

(Patten, 1960; p.1)

The huge commercial success of *Cookery in Colour* which sold over a million copies reflects the shift towards baking as status, display, competition and envy. Although the book still advocates cooking from scratch, baking is presented against a backdrop of the new wide availability of pre-packaged foods and also new technological advancements. Thus, Patten advocates ‘being unusually adventurous with the can opener’, and *Cookery in Colour* contains a whole chapter entitled ‘Television Snacks and Sandwiches’. Here, in contrast to contemporary advice regarding eating together as the familial ideal, television dinners are celebrated, with television ownership, alongside baking and cookery, being part of the display of status and prestige. In one section, Patten advocates ‘choos[ing] food that is easy to serve on a tray’; facilitating the TV dinner. Emphasis is thus on display, status and pride via the public display of the finished product in tandem with new consumer durables and technologies.

Cookery as display is also evidenced via the multiple references in *Cookery in Colour* to cooking and baking to *entertain* visitors to the home. In *Cookery in Colour*, readers are advised that entertaining is no longer the preserve of the upper classes and that with the right skills, hosting dinner parties is perfectly possible, even ‘in these days of small houses and lack of domestic help’. As with the *Bero* recipe books, the intended emotional outcome for women is ‘satisfaction’ and ‘pride’, although in the case of *Cookery in Colour*, pride is described as the result of conspicuously *displaying* the produce of baking to others; of creating ‘recipes you will be proud to present to your friends’. The shift in narrative that we see reflected in recipe books from wholesome, economic homebaking for the wellbeing of the family, to baking as conspicuous display of status and skills is reflected in the explosion of colour, variety and abundance on the pages of *Cookery in Colour*. *Cookery in Colour* therefore represents an important shift, from home-baking as duty of care, to baking as experimental, status building and aspirational. The message behind the recipes is that pleasure and pride is possible via the *visual* display of food.

The shifting gendered representations of baking from *Bero* to *Cookery in Colour*, parallel important wider shifts in the domestic sphere and women’s changing participation in public life. Popular cookery texts such as *Cookery in Colour* offer a good example of the ways in which post-war British domestic femininities were ‘discursively constructed’. Moseley (2008) points out that Margaritte Patten used her post-war television shows to reflect concerns that were frequently in-line with feminist agendas. She argues that Patten offered one of the first popular feminist recognitions of the emerging conflicting dual roles of women in the post-war period and offered women practical advice on how to deal with this. Firstly, Patten’s educational and ‘instructional’ TV persona was reflective of a wider post-war concern with ‘re-educating’ young women in cookery skills and knowledge. The emphasis during this time, as evidenced for example by the *Bero* cookbooks was on cookery *skills* rather than entertaining. Secondly, Patten’s work counters traditional narratives of the time which refused the figure of the working woman who also managed a home. Thus, on the pages of *Cookery in Colour*, the time-pressured *working* housewife is fully acknowledged throughout, for example via regular references to the ‘modern, busy housewife’ and tips for ‘time-controlled cooking’ as ‘an enormous boon to the families of career housewives where there are children or when entertaining’. *Cookery in Colour* thus simultaneously re-produces narratives of women as in need of educating with regards to their roles as housewives, *and also* acknowledges the demands of achieving this alongside their paid work outside of the home. Moseley thus contends that Patten offers a ‘proto-feminist’ commentary of the dual demands of femininity at work and at home; a contention that is borne out on the pages of *Cookery in Colour.*

*Cookery in Colour* opens up opportunities to trouble mainstream assumptions around public and private dichotomies. The home has long been appropriated by housewives in order to bridge traditional modernist boundaries of for example, work / leisure and domestic / commerce (see also Clarke, 1999). The same might be said of *Cookery in Colour* which reflects a challenge to traditional ideals of baking as ‘thrift’ and ‘good housekeeping’. Housewives quickly became active in the creation of new ideals of femininity, especially in using the conspicuous display of food as a means of enhancing the status of the family. *Cookery in Colour* offered an opportunity to be enterprising, although within the limitations and confines of normative domestic femininity. It also offered scope for women to rework their domestic practices by aspiring to betterment, while simultaneously acting on a romantic longing to transcend banality (see also Giles, 2004). Via a series of interviews with Patten, Moseley records stories of women who had worked in the services overseas during the war, and began to seek advice on how to combine their new knowledge of international cuisine whilst simultaneously managing a household budget. Moseley describes these stories as examples of ‘negotiation between travel and modernity’ and women as ‘immobile, tied to kitchen and home’ (2008: 26). Thus, in *Cookery in Colour*, we see a more reflexive account of the multiple roles of women at home, at work and in travel. Perhaps for the first time, we see the ‘busy career housewife’ and in Patten’s author profile in *Cookery in Colour* an emphasis on ‘try[ing] out foreign recipes… collect[ed] on trips abroad and pass[ed] onto readers’.

In the following section, I will explore how the transformations to domestic life that are both reflected and promoted in *Cookery in Colour*, offered a framework from which new baking practices developed and emerged in the late 20th century.

*The Great British Bake Off*: Baking and ‘Hyper-Domesticity’

In the previous two sections, I have identified how women’s domestic baking practices have shifted and been transformed alongside the often-rapid unfolding of modernity. I have focused on the shift beginning in the post-war period in the UK which witnessed a transformation of the home and domestic sphere. In the *Bero* recipe books, a model of baking as part of the housewife’s duty of care was advanced, but this shifted as new representations of the home as space for the conspicuous display of consumer goods emerged, with baking as a key means of displaying status and prestige. In this final section, I will turn to contemporary transformations and articulations of gender and femininities via popular representations of baking. In order to do this, I will focus on the popular BBC baking show *The Great British Bake Off*. I will consider how the show challenges earlier gendered representations of baking, but also how it simultaneously reproduces and offers a sometimes nostalgic, reflection of traditional baking narratives.

*The Great British Bake Off* was first screened by the BBC in August 2010. Until 2016, the show was co-presented by comedy duo Mel Giedroyc and Sue Perkins with baker Paul Hollywood, and Mary Berry a veteran television chef, who already held a successful career on writing and promoting baking and cooking as co-judges. From 2016, Prue Leith took over from Berry, and comedians Noel Fielding and Sandi Toksvig replaced Giedroyc and Perkins. Mary Berry had been food editor of both *Housewife* and *Ideal Home* magazine and authored the bestselling *All Colour Cookbook* in 1970. In contrast to other primetime cookery shows, *The Great British Bake Off*’sfocus is solely on baking as opposed to preparing meals. It is also, notably, a competition, with twelve amateur bakers re-creating recipes and responding to baking challenges set by Mary Berry and Paul Hollywood. The show is filmed in a location designed to resemble a British country fete. It is set in a large marquee decorated with bunting and with constant nods to a ‘homemade’ 1950s kitsch theme; a theme which extends to the multitude of *Great British Bake Off* merchandise on offer. Indeed, the show has proved a huge commercial success, generating celebrity and youth spin-off versions, and reaching a peak audience figure of 14.8 million for the 2016 final. During the time of writing, *The Great British Bake Off*’s production company Love Productions, sold the format of the show for £25 million per annum to Channel 4 leading to much public interest and concern over its future.

Despite its popular appeal and huge commercial success, *The Great British Bake Off* has been commonly dismissed as trivial, stupefying and inconsequential. Itis variously positioned as populist ‘escape’ and as diametrically opposed to the ‘important’ issues of the day. Coincidentally, the furor over the sale of the show to Channel 4 coincided with the acrimonious referendum of Britain’s membership of the EU (‘Brexit’). As one Twitter user remarked, the popularity of *The Great British Bake Off* is evidence of widespread political disengagement:

‘We live in a country where ppl (*sic*) and the media care more about the #GBBO than the Tories relentless attacks in disabled ppl (*sic*) and the NHS’

Writing for *The Spectator*, Ysenda Graham describes *The Great British Bake Off* as an ‘escape’ from important political events. She writes:

‘With Britain tearing itself apart this summer and autumn, one half being nasty about the other half all the time, the weekly hour-long patch of sweetness and taste that is the BBC’s *Great British Bake Off* has been something to treasure and indeed to live for.’

(Graham, 2016)

These popular critiques of *The Great British Bake Off* as frivolous, apolitical mainstream entertainment echo a long-standing feminist reticence to making sense of women’s active participation in domestic spaces (Hollows, 2003), and a tendency to produce accounts of women consumers as empty vessels waiting to be filled with capitalist propaganda (Modleski, 1991; Williamson, 1986). Within contemporary capitalist societies, frequently characterized by rapidly advancing neoliberal policies of austerity, theorists have often overlooked ways in which individuals might utilise vocabularies of neoliberalism in order to help to formulate new subjective identity practices (Gill, 2008). Drawing on Gill’s claims, I argue that *The Great British Bake Off* does more than simply reinforce and reproduce norms of domesticity and the happy, autonomous housewife. Rather, I argue that the wider economic and political climate of neoliberal austerity and the huge popularity of *The Great British Bake Off* are interrelated; and that the popular appeal of the show must be understood alongside contemporary neoliberal narratives of selfhood including individual ‘choice’, diversity, personal pleasure and consumerism.

Television baking shows and cookbooks have traditionally established a shared identity between the presenter and viewer and have offered a space where women could get advice on how to attain the standards of ‘acceptable’ and respectable feminine identity. Men have tended to be absent from TV baking shows which historically have facilitated a dialogue between women, as the extracts from *Bero* and *Cookery in Colour* aboveillustrate. In a notable break from this tradition, *The Great British Bake Off* is one of the first baking shows to offer a seemingly gender-neutral appeal. There are equal numbers of men and women contestants and a similar number of men and women winners. Diversity is also represented in other ways, in terms of race and sexuality alongside gender. For example, in 2015, Nadyia Hussain, a hijab wearing Muslim woman, won the show and Sue Perkins who co-compered the show is an out-lesbian woman; both firsts for British mainstream television.

*The Great British Bake Off* then, can be understood alongside wider cultural narratives of domesticity and the ways in which femininities especially of motherhood and caring are always contested and reconstructed via the media (see also Gill, 2008). I argue that *The Great British Bake Off* reconciles a range of often-contradictory concerns, including the feminist equality agenda and the various demands of consumer capitalism. Indeed, the pleasures of watching *The Great British Bake Off* often occur alongside a self-conscious sentiment that baking might not necessarily be compatible with feminist agendas. As *The Independent* journalist Yasmin Alibah-Brown retorted, ‘I am a feminist and I cook for my husband every night – and I make very good cakes’ (Glennie, 2013). *The Great British Bake Off* consistently reminds its viewers that it is not a show about baking-as-housework, but rather is to do with the ‘real’ and competitive world of ‘professional’ baking. For example, the 2010 winner, Edd Kimber credits the show with repackaging baking so that its appeal extends to men as well as to women. His assertion that baking acquires meaning, importance and ‘worthy-ness’ when it moves from the realm of ‘housewives and the Women’s Institute’ to ‘boys who bake’ reflects new articulations of gender and television baking. Similarly, the series 3 winner John Whaite contrasts ‘real bakers’ as competitive and expressing love via baking, with the much-maligned image of the conformist housewife:

‘People think bakers are dainty little housewives but they are not. They are quite controlling people who want to be told that they are loved.’

(Frost, 2012)

Thus, in *The Great British Bake Off*, gendered identities are constructed through a vocabulary of choice and competition. As the quotes above illustrate, and in direct contrast to *Bero* and *Cookery in Colour*, *The Great British Bake Off* is less about learning how to be a better housewife for the benefit of the family, and more to do with making active choices about baking for personal, individual betterment. However, there is no easy separation in the show between baking and housework. Indeed, individual episodes, cake designs and recipes are frequently ordered around familiar narratives of family, love and care similar to those touched on earlier in the discussion of the *Bero* recipe books. For example Nadiya Hussain’s wedding cake decorated with her wedding jewelry accompanied by her assertion that ‘essentially I am a mother and that’s the job I know best’. Indeed, baking is frequently presented as synonymous with kinship, family ties and love, for example, 2016 finalist Val Stones talked about ‘baking with love’ and 2016 winner Candice Brown narrated her baking with biographical accounts of family histories of baking.

*The Great British Bake Off* then, offers viewers opportunities for judgement not only of cakes, but also of the contestants themselves in line with the ‘reality television’ format. In *The Great British Bake Off*, display is a central tenet of the baking narrative, presented as of equal importance to the taste of the final product. Contestants are judged as much for the effectiveness of display as for the taste, with cakes variously criticized and losing points for looking ‘messy’, ‘uneven’ and ‘garish’ or praised for being ‘neat’, ‘intricate’ and ‘uniform’. Each episode of the show ends with the ‘showstopper’ category where contestants are asked to make a unique ornamental, centerpiece cake. During the judging, expressions such as ‘show off’, ‘celebrate’, ‘impress’, ‘stunning’ and ‘showpiece’ are common. The introduction to *The Great British Bake Off* book makes the importance of display clear:

‘The moment when you reveal your cake is always accompanied by joy and excitement. It doesn’t matter if your cake is simply or extravagantly decorated, it will make an impression. But … the cake must also taste as good as it looks.’

(Collister, 2012: 12)

As we have seen in previous sections, the display of baked produce has long been associated with status and prestige and as evidence of good domestic skills. In Clarke’s study of children’s birthday parties arranged by middle class mothers in North London, the birthday cake displays novelty, reciprocity and an ability to resist market interventions that are seen to be contrary to the idealized versions of motherhood (Clarke, 2007). Clarke argues that the most effective display is one which – at least appears to - involve a minimum amount of effort and expense (p.92). In late capitalist consumer economies, motherhood is idealized to incorporate thrift and skill alongside affective display, however, as Clarke points out, thrift and the ‘work’ and labour of baking are ideally hidden, and resorting to commercial (ready-made) goods is problematized. This stands in direct contrast to both *Bero* where baking is positioned as work and learned expertise, and *Cookery in Colour* where the incorporation of the market and commercially available goods is actively encouraged. In *The Great British Bake Off*, Series 5 contestant Enwezor Nzegwu was eliminated after using ready made fondant icing, the emphasis of the show being on the homemade. We might also argue that creating one’s own cake from scratch with simple, affordable ingredients represents a re-appropriation of mainstream consumerism, in the form of baking as anti-consumerist identities. However, far from being an alternative and non-commercial entity, *The Great British Bake Off* is a huge commercial success; in 2017, Mary Berry launched her range of pre-packaged and ready-made cakes. Thus, although the show extolls the benefits of the homemade, it also reflects the onslaught of neoliberal norms of consumerism, which are often used as resource to help recreate idealized ‘homemade’ aesthetically appropriate versions of the past.

In late modern, neoliberal societies, identitiesare presented and constructed through a vocabulary of choice. Within these vocabularies, women are presented as active agents responsible for their own destinies, pleasures and successes. Genz (2006) identifies neoliberal ideals of consumerism and personal choice alongside independence, pleasure, humour and a renewed focus on the female body as central tenets of post-feminism. She points out that within postfeminist cultures, women become ‘entrepreneur[s] of [their] own image, buying into the standardized femininities while also seeking to re-signify their meanings’ (2006: 333). In *The Great British Bake Off*, women are seemingly able to exert choice and autonomy by demonstrating their abilities as enterprising bakers. On the show, baking is made ‘personal’, with baked goods entwined with personal stories, biographies and dreams. Importantly, the show reflects the mantra popularized in the 1990s of women participating in consumer culture ‘for me’; ‘because I’m worth it’. These discourses are counter to earlier articulations of baking as part of the self-sacrificing nature of the domestic work of maintaining the status and prestige of the family. Despite these new articulations of gender and femininity and particularly the emphasis on personal choice on *The Great British Bake Off*, the show stops short of challenging many of the conventions of patriarchy including the family, marriage and patriotism, as exemplified with Nadiya Hussain’s wedding cake ‘showstopper’ decorated with a red, white and blue sari. The show also stops short of presenting men and women as equal contributors at home, with humour often used to normalize restrictive gender roles. For example, the 2016 celebrity *Bake Off* winner Samantha Cameron jokes:

‘At home I am quite good at washing up as I go along, unlike my husband who is a brilliant cook, an enthusiastic and good cook but who has not mastered clearing up as you go along.’

(Foster, 2016)

Baking has long been seen as a route to betterment and aspiration for women, whether via a representation of self as skillful family economist, or as high consuming innovator and entertainer. *The Great British Bake Off* is no exception. As a hugely successful part of the ‘reality TV’ genre popularized during the 2000s, the show reproduces a range of neoliberal myths and illusions about meritocracy. *The Great British Bake Off* contestants are routinely represented as agents of their own successes and failures, with the baking show positioned as legitimate and effective route to success. The role of the show as seemingly instrumental in transforming lives and identities is echoed in comments made by previous contestants. For example, the 2016 winner Candice Brown described participating in the show as ‘the greatest moment of my life … [that will] *change me as a person*’ (my italics, in Jefferies, 2016). Similarly, Edd Kimber, the 2010 winner remarked, ‘I had low self-confidence and I think the Bake Off gave me the kick I needed’ (cited in Rainey, 2011). This reflects other research exploring the recent rise of reality television as medium through which contemporary notions of reformulating self-hoods, seeking aspiration and ‘making it’ are realized (for example, Ringrose and Walkerdine, 2008).

Conclusion

This paper has explored some of the parallels between the transformations of women’s lives and feminist ideals, alongside the unfolding of media culture. By focusing on three examples of popular home-baking cultures at three historic junctures during the twentieth and twenty first centuries, the paper firmly situates home-baking within the broad unfolding of modernity. It has explored shifting depictions of home-baking alongside representations of women’s roles and responsibilities within the domestic sphere. I have suggested that particular media representations of home-baking become popular, in part, for their ability to create dialogues with women who are tasked with the double-burden of attaining rigid standards of femininity and motherhood via housework but within the limiting and restrictive forces of modernity. Thus, *Bero* recipe books offered women living in post-war Britain a means of enhancing the health and financial stability of the family via its simple and economic recipes made easier with the use of the newly available self-raising flour. As we have seen, during this time, home-baking was popularly bound up with notions of ‘care’ via familial togetherness, health, patriotism and thrift. In *Cookery in Colour*, we see a dramatic shift from the modest black and white recipes and pictures of *Bero*, to an abundance of colour, novelty and vivid display. In this paper, I have located the popular appeal of *Cookery in Colour* alongside the post-war consolidation of mass consumption, and the new uses of home-baking as conspicuous display of status and prestige. The paper argues that far from being empty vessels waiting to be filled with capitalist propaganda, women were active in re-appropriating the domestic sphere, for example, by becoming ‘enterprising selves’ and seeking ‘betterment’ via the innovative use of new food and kitchen technologies. Baking and the conspicuous display of home-baked products became an everyday ritual through which traditional boundaries between public and private spaces became blurred.

In the final section of the paper, I explored the hugely popular BBC TV show, *The Great British Bake Off* and considered the ways in which the show offers new renditions of home-baking while simultaneously reproducing historic and contemporary normative accounts of femininity. In common with other feminist work (such as McRobbie, 2009; Gill, 2007), that has explored the interconnections between neoliberalism and post-feminism, I have argued that *The Great British Bake Off* represents a new post-feminist and ‘hyper-domestic’ version of home-baking. Contestants are presented as ‘self-managing, autonomous and enterprising’ (Gill and Scharff, 2011:5) and the show reproduces neoliberal and post-feminist ideals of the possibility of self-transformation via consumption and commercialization. The show embodies a range of feminist discourses, in particular of choice, diversity, personal pleasure and ‘being oneself’, but does so while simultaneously advancing conventional discourses and modes of domesticity and homemaking that are always underpinned by a high-consuming ideal. The contemporary normalization of commercialization such as with the *Great British Bake Off* contrasts with earlier uneasiness around advertising alongside home-baking narratives. Firmly entrenched, neo-liberal discourses have ensured that publicity, commerce, branding and marketing have become the norm, and one which is clearly visible via the unfolding and cementing of the ‘multi-platforming’ (Bonner, 2009) of popular cookery genres. I have argued that *The Great British Bake Off* offers a nostalgic reflection on the ‘skill’ of baking, which as described in this paper, has long been associated with the financial wellbeing and physical health of the family. In times of austerity, neoliberal discourses, particularly of personal choice and the judgement and surveillance of others, become heightened. I argue that these discourses are pivotal to the popular success of *The Great British Bake Off*.

In conclusion, this paper shows how gendered representations of home-baking have been transformed and re-worked over time. It ends with a discussion of *The Great British Bake Off* as a contemporary example of a home-baking show which encapsulates a ‘post-feminist sensibility’ (Gill, 2007: 147); namely one which is entrenched in neo-liberal discourses around choice, personal pleasure and unfettered consumerism.

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