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### Dreaming of Yesterday: Fashioning Liminal Spaces in 1950s Nostalgia

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#### Abstract

The 1950s era appears to hold a nostalgic place in contemporary memories and current cultural practices. While the 1950s is a period that can signify a time from the late 1940s to the early 1960s (Guffey, 100), the era is often represented as a liminal space or dream world, mediated to reflect current desires. It is a dream-like world, situated half way between the mediated vision of the 1950s and today. Modern participants of 1950s culture need to negotiate what is authentic and what is not, because as Piatti-Farnell and Carpenter remind us *'history is what we want it to be'* (their emphasis). The world of the 1950s can be bent to suit differing interpretations, but it can never be broken. This is because nostalgia functions as a social emotion as well as a personal one (Davis, vii). Drawing on interviews conducted with 27 women and three men, this article critically examines how the 1950s are nostalgically reimagined in contemporary culture via fashion and car festivals. This article asks: in dreaming of the past, how authentic is the 1950s reimagined today from the point of view of the participants?

Liminal spaces exist for participants to engage in their nostalgic reimagining of 1950s culture. Throughout Australia, and in several other countries, nostalgic retro festivals have become commonplace. In Australia prominent annual events include *Cooly Rocks On* (Coolangatta, Qld.), *Chromefest* (The Entrance, NSW) and *Greazefest* (Brisbane, Qld.). Festivals provide spaces where nostalgia can be acted out socially. Bennett and Woodward consider festivals such as these to be giving individuals an "opportunity to participate in a gathering of like-minded individuals whose collective investment in the cultural texts and artefacts on display at the festival are part of their ongoing lifestyle project" (Bennett and Woodward, 15). Festivals are important social events where fans of the 1950s can share in the collective re-imagining of the 1950s.

#### Methodology

Ethnographic interviews with 30 participants who self-identified as wearers of 1950s style fashion. The interviews were conducted in person, via telephone and Skype. The participants come from a range of communities that engage with 1950s retro culture, including pin-up, rockabilly, rock'n'roll dancers and car club members. Due to the commonality of the shared 1950s space, the boundaries between the various cohorts can be fluid and thus some participants were involved with multiple groups. The researcher also immersed herself in the culture, conducting participant observation at various events such as retro festivals, pin-up competitions, shopping excursions and car club runs. Participants were given the option to have their real names used with just a few choosing to be anonymised. The participants ranged in age from 23 to their 60s.

#### Nostalgia

Our relationship with past eras is often steeped in nostalgia. Fred Davis (16-26) identified three orders of nostalgia: simple, reflexive and interpreted. Simple nostalgia "harbors the common belief that THINGS WERE BETTER (MORE BEAUTIFUL) (HEALTHIER) (HAPPIER) (MORE CIVILIZED) (MORE EXCITING) *THEN THAN NOW*" (Davis, 18, his emphasis). This is a relatively straightforward depiction of a halcyon past that is uncritical in its outlook. The second order, reflexive nostalgia, sees subjects question if their view of the past is untainted: "was it really that way?" (21). The third and final order sees the subject question the reasons behind the feelings of nostalgia, asking "why am I feeling nostalgic?" (24).

Davis argues that nostalgia "must in some fashion be a personally experienced *psst*" rather than knowledge acquired second-hand (Davis, 8). Others dispute this, noting a vicarious or second-hand nostalgia can be experienced by those who have no direct experience of the past in question (Goulding, "Exploratory"). Christina Goulding's work at heritage museums found two patterns of nostalgic behaviour amongst visitors whom she termed the *existentials* and the *aesthetics* (Goulding, "Romancing"). For the existentials, experiencing the liminal space of a heritage museum validated their nostalgia "because of their ability to construct their own values and ideologies relating to a particular time period in history and then to transpose these values to a time belonging to their own experiences, whether real or partially constructed" (Goulding "Romancing", 575). This attitude is similar to Davis's first order or simple nostalgia. In comparison, aesthetics viewed history differently; their nostalgia was grounded in an interest in history and its authentic reconstruction, and a desire to escape into an imaginary world, if only for an hour or two. However, they were more critical of the realism presented to them and aware of the limits of accuracy in reconstruction.

#### Second-Hand Nostalgia

For the participants interviewed for this research, second-hand nostalgia for the 1950s was apparent for many. This is not very surprising given the time and distance between now and then. That is, a majority of the participants had not actually lived in the 1950s. For many their interest in the 1950s connected them to key family members such as mothers, fathers and grandparents. Two participants, Noel and Charlie, discussed fathers who were keen listeners of 1950s rock'n'roll music. Women often discussed female family members whose 1950s fashion sense they admired. Statements such as "I look back at the photos now and I think it would have been awesome if I had grown up in that era" (Noel) were common in interviews; however, many of them later qualified this with a more critical analysis of the time.

For some, the 1950s represented a time when things were 'better'. The range of indicators ran from the personal to the social:

Curves and shapeliness were celebrated a little bit more in that era than they are now ... when you look at the 50s woman they were a little bit curvier, when you think of pin-up and that kind of stuff, like Marilyn Monroe and Betty Page and all that sort of style, whereas for so long that hasn't been where fashion has been at. So the average woman is bigger, or is curvier, or... So that's kind of, it just works with my body shape in a way that modern stuff just doesn't necessarily. (Ashleigh)

I get treated differently when I wear Rockabilly as opposed to modern clothes. People will treat me more like a lady, will open doors for me .... I think people respect more people that dress like ladies than girls that let it all show. People have respect for people who respect themselves and I think Rockabilly allows you to do that. Allows you to be pretty and feminine without letting it all show. (Becky)

For others, their fascination with the 1950s was limited to the aesthetic as they drew a more critical analysis of the era:

There's a housewife's guide. I'm sure you've read that a housewife is expected to have a bow in her hair when her husband gets home from work. And should have the children in bed or silent. And we should be appreciating that he's had a very hard day at work, so he should come home and put his feet up and we should rub his feet and provide him with a hot meal ... . The mindset was different between then and now, and it's not really that big a gap in history. (Belinda)

The majority of women interviewed noted that they would be unwilling to relinquish modern social attitudes towards women to return to an era where women were expected to remain in the domestic sphere. They cited a number of differences, including technology (modern washing machines, dishwashers, etc.), gender relations (one participant noted rape in marriage), expectations to marry and have children young, careers, own finances etc.

Nooooo! Absolutely not. Nooooo! No way! Oh my gosh! The labour in housework. Almost daily I'm grateful for the dishwasher and the stick Dyson for the floors and I don't know, the steam iron. So many of the conveniences that you know, you go down stairs in the rush before the walk to school, throw the clothes into the washing machine and know that in 30 minutes it's done. ... No way would I go back. I absolutely would not want to live in the 50s regarding the social mores. It's a little bit too repressive ... . Love the look though! (Anna)

Despite this, 'outsiders' (those who do not participate in 1950s subcultures) will often assume that since adherents are dressed in fifties style they obviously wish they could return there:

And it sometimes will open a conversation where people will say "you should have been born earlier" or "I bet you wished you lived in the 50s" and I always say "no, I'm glad I live in an era where there's less racism and sexism and I can work. (Emma)

In contrast, men who were interviewed had expressed fewer barriers to living in the 1950s. Both Charlie and Noel were quick to say yes when asked if they would be happy to live in the actual 1950s. Even Ashley, a homosexual man who dresses in 1950s drag as a woman on the weekends would "give it a go". This perhaps reflects the privileged position that white heterosexual men enjoyed in the era. Ashley could, like many homosexual men at the time, easily disguise his sexual orientation in order to fit into this privileged position, keeping his overt drag behaviour to "safe gay spaces" (Cole, 45). Further, all three men are white, although Charlie, being from a Cypriot background, may experience a different social response if he was to return to the actual 1950s. Immigrants from southern Europe were not welcomed by all Australians, with some openly hostile to the immigrants (Murphy, 156-64). Women, on the other hand, would experience a retrograde transformation of their position within society; women of colour even more so. This echoes other studies of historically based cohorts where women in particular hold progressive modern views and are reluctant to return to time periods such as the 1960s (Jenss) and the 1970s (Gregson, Brooks, and Crewe).

#### Popular Cultures as a Conduit to the Past

Nostalgia is often mediated through popular culture, with many participants referencing popular icons of the fifties such as Elvis, Rita Hayworth, and Marilyn Monroe. This was complicated by references to popular culture films and music which were themselves a product of 1950s nostalgia, such as the movie *Grease* (1978) and the band the *Stray Cats* (1979-present). The 1950s has been the ongoing subject of revivalism since at least the late 1960s (Reynolds, 277), and this layering complicates social understandings of the decade. One participant, Charlie (in his late 50s),

notes how the 1950s revival in the 1970s gave him the opportunity to immerse himself in the culture he admired. For Charlie, popular culture gave him the opportunity to wear authentic 1950s clothing and surround himself with 1950s memorabilia, music, and cars.

Alternative clothing allows people to create an identity outside the parameters of contemporary fashion. For women, the thin body, replete with small breasts and hips, has been held up as the ideal in both mass media and fashion from advent of Twiggy in the 1960s to the present day (Hackett and Rall). Yet, 1950s style clothing allows wearers the freedom to create a fashionable identity that presents a different body ideal; that of the hyper-feminine woman who is characterised by her exaggerated hour-glass figure. This body shape has recently become fashionable again with influencers such as Kim Kardashian promoting this as an alternate to the thin body ideal. For men, the clothes represent the complimentary ideal of the hyper-masculine man: tight shirts, worker jeans, working class suits. Some participants, like Charlie, wear original 1950s clothing.

I've got my dad's sports coat, and I still wear it today ... that song ... [Marty Robins - 'A white sport coat and a pink carnation'] ... it explains that coat. My dad had it when he first came to Australia ... I've still got it today and I still wear it proudly. (Charlie)

However, due to the age of available authentic clothing, complicated by the fact that many garments from that era have already been recycled, there remains limited supply of true 1950s clothing for today's fans. Most rely upon reproduction clothing which varies in its level of authenticity. Some reproduction brands remake styles from the fifties, whereas others are merely inspired by the era. In her study of costume, Valerie Cumming argued that it was "rare for clothing from previous eras to be worn in an unaltered state as it offered an alternative construction of identity" (Cumming, 109). Contemporary body sizes and shapes are different from their mid-century counterparts due to range of issues, particularly the average increase in body size. Women's bust and waist measurements, for example, have increased by about ten percent over the last century (Etchells, Kinkade, and Henneberg). Further, technological advances in fabric coupled with changing social mores around undergarments mean that the body upon which garments sit is shaped differently. Most of the women in this study feel no need to wear restrictive, body modifying undergarments such as girdles or merry widows beneath their clothes. This echoes other research which reports that re-enactors wear clothes that are not really authentic, but "approximations created for twenty-first century" fans (Kiesel). Despite this diluting of 1950s style to suit modern sensibilities, the superficial look of the clothes are, for the participants, strongly reminiscent of the 1950s.

I have a very Rubenesque body shape, so when I was younger that was the sort of styles that was better on me. So I like the pencil skirts enhanced a bit that weren't supposed to be enhanced because I came from a very conservative Christian background. But then the A-line skirts were what my mom put me in to go to church and everything. Anyway it just looked really nice. As I watched television and saw those styles on some of those older shows that my parents let me watch, that is what I got drawn too, that sort of silhouette. (Donna, early 40s)

The act of dressing in this way separates participants from the mainstream. Here fashion, in particular, differentiates this look from subcultural style. Dick Hebdige argued that subcultures are rooted in working class struggles, creating an alternate society away from the mainstream, where clothing becomes a critical identifier of group membership. Some participants extend their consumption of 1950s goods into areas such as homewares, cars and music. 1950s cars, particularly large American cars such as Cadillacs and Australian-made Holdens, are lovingly restored. Charlie, a mechanic by trade, has restored numerous cars for both himself and other people. Restoring cars can often be an expensive endeavour, locking out many would-be owners. A number of participants spoke of their desire to own an original car, even if it was out of their budget.

Cars too are often modified from their original incarnation. Sometimes this is due to comfort, such as having modern day air-conditioning systems or power-steering installed. Other times this is due to legal requirements. It is not uncommon to see cars at festivals installed with child safety seats, when children during the actual 1950s often rode in cars without seatbelts even installed. Like clothing, it appears for cars that if the aesthetic is strongly reminiscent of the 1950s, then the underlying structural changes are acceptable.

### Identities and Spaces

Retro festivals as liminal spaces provide the opportunity for participants to play at being in the actual 1950s. As a shared space they rely upon a critical mass of people to create and maintain this illusion. Participants who attended these events expressed a lot of enthusiasm for them:

I just love the atmosphere, looking around, looking at the stalls and other people's outfits. Listening to the music and having a dance. (Kathleen, early 20s)

Oh, that's my favourite weekend of the year ... I've been to every single one since the first one. Yeah, I think this is the nineteenth year ... And we all kind of, there's a bunch of us that go and we stay near there and we are there for the whole thing. Yeah, and I've already started sewing my wardrobe. Planning my outfits. I don't know, we just love it. There's people that I only see once a year at Greazefest and I get to catch up with people. And I flit around like a social butterfly, like I'm running around, and I also have a thing where I call it the weekend of a thousand selfies. So I just take hundreds of selfies with people and myself and I do a big thing up every year. Yeah. But I love it, I love the music mainly. But it's a good excuse, another good excuse, to make some nice outfits and get dressed up in something different. (Vicki, early 40s)

So I'm at shows basically every weekend. Shows, swap meets and in the garage, there's always something. And when you get into this car life, it drags the 50s in with you, if that is your decade. It just follows you in. (Ashleigh, early 20s)

The festival space becomes liminal as it is not truly part of the past, but it is not of the present either. As Valerie Cumming's statement above notes, clothes from the past that are worn today are usually altered to suit modern sensibilities. So too are festivals which are designed and enacted within our contemporary paradigm. This can be seen in Pin-Up competitions which are present at many of the festivals. Rather than a parade of young beauties, modern interpretations feature a diverse vision of womanhood, representing a range of ages, body sizes, genders, and beauty ideals. For some participants this is an empowering liminal space.

I went through a stage where I had severe depression and I found the thing that was making me happy was when I put on my 50s clothes and it's an entire separate personality, because there is me, I'm a very quiet, normal person and there is Chevy Belle ... and it's this whole extra style, this extra confidence that I have and that was helping me through depression. (Ashleigh, early 20s)

### A Contested Dream

If the liminal space of a re-imagined 1950s is to succeed, members must negotiate, whether explicitly or implicitly, what constitutes this space. When is someone bending the rules, and when is someone breaking them? Throughout the interviews there was an undercurrent of controversy as to certain elements.

The Pin-Up community was the most critiqued. Pin-Up style often references styles from both the forties and fifties, merging the two eras into one. Vicki questioned if their style was even 1950s at all:

I don't really understand where some of the pin-up looks come from. Like, sort of like, that's not 50s. That's not really 50s looking, so don't call it 50s if it's not ... some of the hairstyles I sort of go "I don't know what, what that is". I'm not quite sure why everybody's got victory ... like got victory rolls when they're not 1950s ... I get a bit funny and I know it sounds really pretentious when I say it out loud. Yeah, I don't know. I sound pretentious, I don't want to sound pretentious. (Vicki, early 40s)

Here Vicki is conflicted by her wish to be inclusive with her desire to be authentic. The critique continues into the use of tattoos and the type of people who entered these competitions:

I found the pin-up competitions seem to be more for people, for the bigger ladies that wanted to wear the tattoos ... rather than something that was just about the fashion ... (Simone, early 50s)

Coinciding with Corrie Kiesel's findings about Jane Austen festivals, "what constitutes the authentic for the festival community is still under negotiation". The 1950s liminal space is a shared dream and subject to evolution as our changing contemporary norms and the desire for authenticity come into conflict and are temporarily resolved, before being challenged again.

### Conclusion

Via 1950s fashion, cars, music, and festivals, the participants of this study show that there exist multiple liminal spaces in which identity and social boundaries are made malleable. As a result, there exists mostly inclusive spaces for the expression of an alternative social and cultural aesthetic. While engagement with 1950s culture, at least in this research, is predominantly feminine, men do participate albeit in different ways. Yet for both men and women, both are dreaming of a past that is constantly imaged and re-imagined, both on a personal level and on a social level.

As the temporal distance between now and the actual 1950s expands, direct experience of the decade diminishes. This leaves the era open to re-interpretation as contemporary norms and values affect understandings of the past. Much of the focus in the interviews were upon the consumption of nostalgic goods rather than values. This conflict can be most strongly seen in the conflicted responses participants gave about pin-up competitions. For some participants the pin-ups were lacking in an essential authenticity, yet the pin-ups with their tattoos and reinterpretation of the past demonstrate how fluid and malleable a culture based on a past era can be. The 1950s scene promises to become more fluid as it undergoes further evolutionary steps in the future.

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