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Throwing Some Weight Around: Women and Fatness in the
Contemporary, Post-colonial Societies of Australia, Canada and
New Zealand

A thesis submitted to fulfil the requirements for completion of a

Doctor of Philosophy

from

University of Wollongong

by

Antoinette Holm, BA (Hons)

English Studies Programme

1998

Declaration

I hereby certify that this thesis is the result of my own original research and has not been submitted for a higher degree to another University or similar institution.

Antoinette Holm

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My grandmothers, Ella-May and Joyce, mother Annette, and sister Sonya are the inspiration for this work, and it is to them that I dedicate it.

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Abstract

Body size is intrinsic to contemporary Western femininity. Disciplines of health and beauty not only shape the female body but define the limits of the form. Body size and eating is a topic that touches on the lives of most women in Australia, New Zealand and Canada. In this thesis I explore the parameters of the fat body, problematise popular notions of fatness, and look at the way in which body size is fundamental to the social construction of femininity in the post colonial, contemporary societies of Canada, New Zealand and Australia.

This thesis is not about obesity or about medically-defined excess, it is about cultural ideas of fatness, and the way in which fatness is inscribed upon forms in excess of the “docile body”. I am interested in the way in which fatness intersects with docility, the institutionally-desired disciplined body of idealised (and reduced) femininity, and the ramifications for both fat and docile bodies.

The body addressed in this thesis is a textual one. Literature is a means by which to illuminate the discursive practices of society, and by contextualising literature within historical and cultural debates, it becomes possible to see the way in which the body at the centre of a text is constructed and positioned with regard to a number of competing discourses. It is also possible to identify the ways in which the feminine body is marked by, and negotiates, the processes of cultural inscription. The visual image, also, is a powerful medium through which socio-cultural images are reflected and challenged, and so I include a discussion of film within the thesis. In the following seven chapters selected films and novels from Australia, Canada and New Zealand are positioned within cultural, political and national contexts that impact upon the meanings of fatness.

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Preface

In this thesis I go in search of the fat lady, a gargantuan figure of mythical proportions. But I do not search for her in myths of the past, rather I look for her in the contemporary post-colonial societies of New Zealand, Australia and Canada. The fat lady can be found behind the contemporary images of slender, refined beauty that modern women are encouraged to emulate. She can also be found in non-mainstream, “non-white”, mad, “ethnic” figures that together shadow the idealised form.

In societies where considerable effort is invested in, and emphasis put upon, the purging of fat, the fat lady is the nightmare possibility of lack of control, visibly enacted as rolls of flesh. The fat lady is more than this, however. She becomes fat through the relationship between class, race, ethnicity and nationalism. She becomes fat through ideas of excess that determine “normal” femininity in the context of patriarchy. She becomes fat by being more than political discourses can incorporate.

In the following thesis I problematise popular and medical discourses of fatness, and provide a discussion upon theories of bodily inscription and how they can facilitate an investigation of female fatness. I then look at different expressions of fat bodies, widening the notion of fatness to incorporate a range of excessive female forms. The fat lady within this thesis comes in many shapes and sizes, and has a range of volitions and desires. Although she remains marginalised by discourses of contemporary femininity that have no room for her size, she nevertheless refuses containment of docile femininity.

Chapter One

Throwing some weight around: the politics of body size

There are images of female bodies everywhere. They smile out at us from billboards, bus stops, magazines, televisions and films. Plastic models in shop windows do grotesque impressions of “the feminine”, and teenagers masquerade as mature women in glossy magazine advertisements. Around us all the time are the parameters of “the feminine”, the fetishised slim-line female body, a shocking parody of the emaciated body of the “third world”. Behind this image of reduced femininity is the fat female body. The vision of the fat body is mobilised as the nightmare possibility for those women who fail to imitate adequately the contemporary attractive form. Body fat has become a measure of morality, personal value and social worth. Instead of staying with the thin body and following issues of subversion or compliance, this study examines the *other* side, the implicit figure against which the thin body is measured and judged: the fat female body.¹ The meanings of fatness are multiple and contradictory, but fatness is most often, in popular discourse, implicitly measured in relation to the ideal thin body. In this thesis I explore the parameters of the fat body, problematise popular notions of fatness, and look at the way in which body size is fundamental to the social construction of femininity.

¹There is considerable discussion over whether the anorexic body disrupts patriarchal power relationships or whether it replicates gender oppression. See Susan Bordo, “Reading the slender body” in Mary Jacobus, Evelyn Fox Keller, Sally Shuttleworth (eds), *Body/Politics: Women and the Discourses of Science* (New York & London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 83–112; Susan Bordo, “The body and the reproduction of femininity: a feminist appropriation of Foucault” in Alison M. Jagger & Susan Bordo (eds), *Gender/Body/Knowledge: Feminist Reconstructions of Being and Knowing* (New Brunswick & London: Rutgers UP, 1989); Sandra Lee Bartky, “Foucault, femininity, and the modernization of patriarchal power” in Irene Diamond & Lee Quinby (eds), *Feminism and Foucault: Reflections on Resistance* (Boston: Northeastern UP, 1988); Liz Eckermann, “Self-starvation and binge-purging: embodied selfhood/sainthood” *Australian Cultural History: bodies* 13 (1994), pp. 82–99; Matra Robertson, *Starving in the Silences: an exploration of Anorexia Nervosa* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1992).

I look firstly at the relevance of body shape to contemporary constructs of femininity. Secondly, theories of the body will be outlined, and their strengths and weaknesses discussed. Thirdly and finally I address the relevance of these theories to a literary and film analysis covering the post-colonial societies of New Zealand, Canada and Australia. The broad trajectories of the arguments to follow in chapters two to seven will also be outlined.

Body size is intrinsic to contemporary Western femininity.² Disciplines of health and beauty not only shape the female body but define the limits of the form. Body size and eating is a topic that touches on the lives of most women in Australia, New Zealand and Canada. As many as 80 per cent of girls and young women in Australia, for example, may have been on weight-reducing diets.³ The diet industry is extremely profitable, with Jenny Craig, Gloria Marshall, and even Weight Watchers, testament to the internationalisation of the approved female body shape. In the 1990s it is not good to be fat, flab is out and toned is in. Women in Australia, Canada and New Zealand, and throughout the Western world, endure all manner of regimens to rid themselves of superfluous, excessive, unsightly fat.

The gym and aerobics scenes, as well as diet regimens and clinics, play an important role in shaping male and female bodies. Currently both men and women are being encouraged to develop muscle and refine their shape. As Annette Corrigan points out:

[b]ody rituals and practices are continually implicated in the dynamic play of gendered power relations, with all its revisions,

² I use the term Western to refer to the so-called developed nations, influenced by British, European and American cultures and/or imperialism, and the predominant construction of femininity within these countries. Western also suggests the political and ideological links between Australia, New Zealand and Canada, and a larger international community.

³ G.F. Huon & L.B. Brown, *Fighting With Food: overcoming bulimia nervosa* (Kensington: New South Wales UP, 1988), p. 12.

redefinitions and negotiations of masculinity as well as femininity.⁴

But women's increasing participation in gym culture, for example, does not mean that men and women's bodies are being shaped in the same way.

Women's motivation for fitness, in the war against the body, like men's, is to trim down, improve health, and develop muscle. But it is also to combat cellulite, reduce and improve one's shape, or get into the right shape. Fitness is combined with innumerable diets, and women are encouraged to slim down and shape up for their health, their morality and their sense of well being. In the words of Rosemary Conley, author of the popular diet book *Complete Hip and Thigh Diet*:

[t]he bottom line is that when a woman goes into a dress shop and puts on a skirt, looks in the mirror and it fits, she feels a whole lot better about herself than if it looks dreadful. That isn't magazines, television and film stars. It's you in front of your eyes.⁵

Thus the slim-line feminine body is also implicated within a consumer capitalist system that depends upon women's consumption of goods.⁶

Contemporary femininity requires a high degree of discipline to produce a body that speaks to the feminine cultural shape, and the modern body is increasingly read as the expression of personality or identity. As such,

the position of the body within contemporary popular culture reflects an unprecedented *individualization* of the body. Growing numbers of people are increasingly concerned with the health,

⁴ Annette Corrigan, "Fashion, beauty and feminism" *Meanjin* 51:1 (1992), p. 120.

⁵ Matthew Gwyther, "Slimming for Jesus" *Good Weekend: The Sydney Morning Herald* 23 May (1992), p. 24.

⁶ The encouraging of women's desire for the perfect, reduced female body creates demand for all manner of industries, including diet and fitness clinics as well as cosmetic surgery.

shape and appearance of their own bodies as expressions of individual identity.⁷

This individualisation of the body, reveals the connection of bodies to the production and consumption of material goods, and is useful to the capitalist paradigm. Individualism lies at the heart of a capitalist ethos that encourages self-orientated pursuits, rather than collective or civil awareness, or motivation. The irony of the discourse of individualism of the body is that the individual body is encouraged to fit a narrow constrained body shape, one that is the same as everyone else's.

This individual normal body is easily recognised. The currently desired female body is slender, has medium to large breasts and smooth, shapely, slim thighs. But despite the image of unchanging beauty ideals, the perfect body is constantly undergoing change. Marilyn Munroe, for example, is fat according to contemporary measures of attractive femininity, despite being a sex symbol in her own era. It is a change, however, that is concealed within discourses of natural beauty, that suggests that beautiful people are born that way.⁸ The naturalising of culturally-specific, dynamic determinations of female beauty allows the practice or discipline of female beauty to be hidden beneath the rhetoric of "making-the-most-of-one's-self". Thus it becomes normal and natural to change the body through depilation, make-up, diet, gender-specific exercise, and even plastic surgery, whilst at the same time maintaining the myths of effortless beauty. Tremendous effort is invested in maintaining an attractive, slim form.

Female fat holds a special place in Western societies. Naomi Wolf argues that, "female fat is the subject of public passion, and women feel guilty about female fat."⁹ Popular discourses suggest that the slender, fat-reduced body is attainable by any

⁷ Chris Shilling, *The Body and Social Theory* (London, Newbury Park, New Delhi: Sage, 1993), p. 1.

⁸ See Christine Hogan, "The incredible shrinking woman" *The Good Weekend: The Sydney Morning Herald* 18 March (1995), for a discussion of how Australian "supermodel" Elle MacPherson's body has changed over a number of years, and the concealing of that change within the rhetoric of "The Body", pp. 44–50.

⁹ Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1990), p. 187.

woman, it just takes application and determination. Despite a biological need for greater amounts of body fat than men, women are maligned for figures that reveal fat.¹⁰ Fat in the right places is celebrated (breasts are allowed to be fat but hips are not for example), but the overwhelming message is to rid the body of fat through application and determination.

Witness the transformation of Madonna from curvaceous to slender and muscular, or changes in the body of Australia's former Olympic swimmer Lisa Curry-Kenny. Curry-Kenny said in an interview in the *Good Weekend*, "[f]rom the neck down you can sculpt your body any way you want ... You can be fat, you can be skinny, you can be toned, you can be untuned."¹¹ According to this logic, the unattractive outsized woman has failed to exercise enough discipline to achieve a toned form.

The opinion expressed by Curry-Kenny is an example of the way in which cultural (and economic) expectations are inscribed upon the body with the complicity of the woman, and also an example of an accompanying rhetoric of active self-motivation. Thus the pursuit of the idealised form is presented as attainable and desirable. That women generally embrace cultural expectations is clearly evident through attendance at diet clinics and aerobics classes, and as Sandra Bartky argues

no one is marched off for electrolysis at gunpoint, nor can we fail to appreciate the initiative and ingenuity displayed by countless women in an attempt to master the rituals of beauty.¹²

Adherence to codes of femininity is the responsibility of the individual, and failures of will are interpreted as moral failings or political radicalism.

It is through the historical and cultural contextualisation of the images and rhetoric of attractive and normative femininity that the intersection of body and politics is most

¹⁰ For a discussion on how fat women are treated see Katherine Gilday dir, *The Famine Within* (Kandor Productions in association with the National Film Board of Canada and TV Ontario Canada, 1990).

¹¹ Jane Cadzow, "Let's talk about pecs" *Good Weekend: The Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 June (1992), p. 21.

visible. The “Victorian Lady” is an example of the historically-specific inscription of femininity and docility. In *The Flesh Made Word*, Helena Michie writes that the Victorian Lady

does not need to eat broth because she does not have male “desires” and because she does little to work up an appetite of any sort. Her femininity and her social position are defined quite literally by her negation; denial of hunger is an affirmation of a precarious class position.¹³

The shape and size of the Victorian Lady was fundamental to an embodiment of class, culture and dominant constructions of femininity. This middle-class Victorian Lady, historically constituted as she was, is nevertheless still familiar in contemporary Australian, New Zealand and Canadian societies, along with the restrictions on eating, the fetishising of feminine passivity, and (non)sexuality, as well as the physical embodiment of oppression within the constrained, contorted female form. The specific politics of the body may have changed over time but the reduced, constrained contemporary form still embodies them.

Although Victorian corsets are no longer universally worn, women’s bodies continue to be shaped by clothing and exercise. Naturalised as fashion (seasonal, practical or *haute couture*), off-the-rack clothing has become a powerful means by which the female body is defined. In conjunction with mass markets, women’s clothing conceals the production of an acceptable femininity, and rather more insidiously, obscures the existence of class, race and ethnic differences. A very specific version of the female body is universalised and presented as natural and normal.

The preoccupation with the slim-line woman has important political ramifications. As Sandra Bartky argues, “[u]nder the current ‘tyranny of slenderness’ women are

¹² Sandra Bartky, “Foucault, femininity” in Irene Diamond & Lee Quinby (eds), p. 75.

¹³ Helena Michie, *The Flesh Made Word: female figure and women’s bodies* (New York & Oxford: Oxford UP, 1987), pp. 17–18.

forbidden to become large or massive; they must take up as little space as possible.”¹⁴ The shape of a woman’s body, then, means something. Where distinctions are constructed and maintained between female and male, the gendering of the body is an important site for inscription of dominance or subordination based on sex. It is a political statement and a cultural expression, and fat women are threatening, anarchic and very frightening in societies that celebrate the emaciated woman. Fat is a moral issue in societies centred on the body as self-expression, and fatness in women comes into direct conflict with a particular cultural expression of femininity, “a body on which an inferior status has been inscribed.”¹⁵

In societies that celebrate slenderness as an expression of self-discipline, or control and denial in the face of plenty, the fat body is imbued with meanings of lack of control, lack of self-discipline. The fat body is associated with moral failings and a denial and rejection of femininity. When femininity is itself defined by a thin body, the fat body is read as its opposite: non-feminine. Moreover, when thinness is associated with the exercise of self-discipline and control, fatness signifies a lack of control.¹⁶ Fat and thin are often understood as binary opposites. You are either thin or fat;

“Fat”/ “thin” can only be set up as an essential opposition by the establishment of a social system of differences, relations between terms. (Social meaning is created by a term’s differentiation and opposition to other terms in a system.)¹⁷

Fatness is also set against thinness in health discourses. In a Western medical model, fat is the sickly opposite to the healthy thin body. This is despite a lack of “scientific evidence” of a sustained link between “excess” weight and illness or

¹⁴ Sandra Bartky, “Foucault, femininity” in Irene Diamond & Lee Quinby (eds), p. 73.

¹⁵ Sandra Bartky, “Foucault, femininity” in Irene Diamond & Lee Quinby (eds), p. 71. It is argued in *The Famine Within* that the gaining of fat is perceived as a moral failing on the part of the individual.

¹⁶ In *Being Fat Is Not A Sin* (London: Pandora, 1989), Shelley Bovey argues that “[a]norexia nervosa may be a sickness but it begins with a deliberate choice. No one chooses to be fat”, p. 3.

mortality.¹⁸ The deficiency of the fat body, moreover, is located in the visible untuned muscle, wobbly thighs or protruding stomach, which indicates lack of fitness and lack of discipline.

The fat body, then, is left mostly undefined, existing as the *other* body. Rather than being an opposite, however, the fat body is every body other than the idealised slim body. It is every body size that is outside, or in excess of, the thin ideal. In *Slaves of Chic*, Joanne Finkelstein writes that “[m]ore people are overweight now than at any time in history”, and suggests that this is due, in part to the sedentary nature of modern society and to an over-abundance of food.¹⁹ But the mobilisation of the term overweight suggests that there is a normal-sized body against which this overweight body is measured. This maintains the myth that the slim body is, if not desirable, at least the original body.

In medical terms fatness is contained within the categories of overweight and obese. The dimensions of the bodies are determined by a body-mass index, based upon a definition of an ideal or normal body through a ratio of height to weight.²⁰ But despite being able to plot the movement of a body from the normal (and healthy) range into first the overweight and then obese dimensions, “overweight” remains a fluid and all-encompassing term, an amorphous body that shadows the ideal. Fatness is not so much a definable, empirical measure of stones, pounds or kilos, but a measure of “too much” or excess; an excessiveness that is determined by an ideal, that is in turn a reduced, passive, docile female body.

¹⁷ Nicky Diamond, “Thin is the feminist issue” *Feminist Review* 19 March (1985), p. 54.

¹⁸ I am distinguishing between clinical categories of obesity and overweight. See Katherine Gilday’s *The Famine Within* for a refutation of the popular idea that excess body fat is associated with increased mortality.

¹⁹ Joanne Finkelstein, *Slaves of Chic: an a-z of consumer pleasures* (Port Melbourne Victoria: Minerva, 1994), p. 68.

²⁰ See J.S. Garrow & W.P.T. James (eds), *Human Nutrition and Dietetics* (Edinburgh, London, Madrid, Melbourne, New York & Tokyo: Churchill Livingstone, 1993), for a presentation of the medical definition of, and treatments for, obesity.

The focus of this thesis is the amorphous fat body rather than the clinically overweight body. This thesis is not about obesity or about medically-defined excess, it is about cultural ideas of fatness, and the way in which fatness is inscribed upon forms in excess of the docile body. I am interested in the way in which fatness intersects with docility, the institutionally-desired disciplined body of idealised (and reduced) femininity, and the ramifications for both fat and docile bodies.

One response to the threat of the fat female body is to marginalise it; a woman's femininity can be called into question, her morality attacked (she lacks control), and her sanity can be disputed, invalidating her voice and opinion.²¹ These are all part of a patriarchal response to a transgression of specific femininity, and "[t]ransgression contains nothing negative, but affirms limited being — affirms the limitlessness into which it leaps as it opens this zone to existence for the first time."²² The fat body becomes the means by which to discursively police the boundaries of "normality", with vilification (harassment and ridicule) meted out to women who expand beyond the acceptable celebrated limits. But nevertheless, the fat female body does confront and interrupt the hegemonic discourses.

Kathleen Rowe identifies this fat, transgressive figure as an "unruly woman", a topos that "reverberates whenever women disrupt the norms of femininity and the social hierarchy of male over female through excess and outrageousness."²³ With her antecedents in medieval and early modern Europe, this figure came into her own through a "grotesque" body that "exaggerates its processes, bulges, and orifices, whereas the static, monumental 'classical (or bourgeois) body' conceals them".²⁴ Rowe draws on the work of historian Natalie Zemon Davis and her identification of the "Woman on Top" in

²¹ For a discussion on the ways in which fat women are responded to, see Shelley Bovey, *Being Fat*, and Katherine Gilday, *The Famine Within*.

²² Michel Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: selected essays and interviews*, Donald F. Bouchard (ed), trans. Donald F. Bouchard & Sherry Simon, (Ithaca, New York: Cornell UP, 1980), p. 35.

²³ Kathleen Rowe, *The Unruly Woman: gender and the genres of laughter* (Austin, USA: University of Texas Press, 1995), p. 30.

Society and Culture in Early Modern France, and Russian semiotician Michail Bakhtin's influential work *Rabelais and his World*, where Bakhtin expounds a politics of the carnivalesque. Rowe argues that the grotesque body that was empowered through the site of carnival has continued in various guises through history into the present period, although the positive association with this unruly female body is greatly diminished in the contemporary United States society (and, I would argue, in Western societies more generally). Despite this, however, "the unruly woman can be seen as prototype of woman as subject — transgressive above all when she lays claim to her own desire."²⁵

Rowe describes a number of qualities of unruly women (of whom Mae West, Roseanne Arnold and the Jim Henson Muppet, Miss Piggy are examples), which includes the following:

Her body is excessive or fat, suggesting her unwillingness or inability to control her physical appetites.

Her speech is excessive, in quantity, content, or tone.

She may be androgynous or hermaphroditic, drawing attention to social construction of gender.

She may be old or a masculinized crone, for old women who refuse to become invisible in our culture are often considered grotesque.

Her behaviour is associated with looseness and occasionally whorishness, but her sexuality is less narrowly and negatively defined than is that of the femme fatale. She may be pregnant.

²⁴ Katherine Rowe, *The Unruly Woman*, p. 33.

²⁵ Katherine Rowe, *The Unruly Woman*, p. 31.

She is associated with dirt, liminality (thresholds, borders, or margins), and taboo, rendering her above all a figure of ambivalence.²⁶

The unruly woman, then, is a figure that is in excess of the docile female body that is so celebrated within contemporary Western societies. The unruly woman that Rowe identifies is also the fat woman of this thesis. As I outline later in this chapter the division of chapters is based on bodies that are versions of the fat woman. The fat women of this thesis are old, pregnant, dirty, excessive, and loquacious. In short they are versions of the unruly woman whose transgression threatens to disrupt constructions of femininity that privilege passivity and invisibility. In this thesis the unruly woman or fat female body is looked at in the context of the contemporary societies of Australia, Canada and New Zealand.

The “grotesque” carnivalesque body, as Rowe argues, is an historical figure that can be recognised in contemporary forms. That the grotesqueness of this body stems from its proximity to the physical is no surprise, echoing as it does the historical philosophical tradition that maintains a distinction between body and mind. Elizabeth Grosz writes of the philosophical dichotomy, Cartesian dualism, that characterises mainstream Western philosophy:

Decartes, in short, succeeded in linking the mind/body opposition to the foundations of knowledge itself, a link which places the mind in a position of hierarchical superiority over and above nature, including the nature of the body. From that time until the present, subject or consciousness is separated from and can reflect on the world of the body, objects, qualities.²⁷

²⁶ Katherine Rowe, *The Unruly Woman*, p. 31.

²⁷ Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: towards a corporeal feminism* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1994), p.6.

The separation of the body and mind, however, is also gendered with the body often being feminised, and the intellect masculinised.²⁸ The body, according to philosophical tradition, is an impediment to reason and needs to be transcended to achieve the goal of rational thought. Within this paradigm menstruation, for example, marks women as “of the body” and therefore less capable of rationality.

Cartesian dualism has proved to be one of the most powerful, persistent ways of interpreting the body that successive generations of philosophers have struggled with.²⁹ The links that this dualism has to the shape and experience of “the body” in the 1980s and 1990s Australian, New Zealand and Canadian societies is in the persistent distinction between the biology of the body and the power of the mind over the body. Lisa Curry-Kenny’s statement that anyone can shape their body any way they want is a case in point where the mind can be employed to overcome the deficiency of the body. Ironically the mind and body power relationship is most often used to confirm women’s inability to overcome the biology of the body in the guise of “hormones”.

Although Cartesian dualism and its antecedents may be a predominant way of constructing the body, the mind of the individual and Western culture generally, it is not the only means, and philosophers such as Nietzsche, followed by Foucault, Deleuze and Lingis have questioned the basis of such a dualism.³⁰ From Nietzsche on these philosophers have

²⁸ Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, p. 5.

²⁹ For a discussion of social theory and the body see: Chris Shilling, *The Body and Social Theory*; Bryan Turner, “Theoretical Developments in the Sociology of the Body” *Australian Cultural History: bodies* 13 (1994), pp. 13–30; M. Featherstone, M. Hepworth, B.S. Turner (eds), *The Body, Social Process and Cultural Theory* (London: Sage Publications, 1991). For a discussion of the separation between self and body in women see Emily Martin, *The Woman in the Body: a cultural analysis of reproduction* (Milton Keynes: Open UP, 1989).

³⁰ Anthony Giddens writes “[t]he new philosophers ... discovered the state, and they discovered power.... For the new philosophers were the disillusioned survivors of the ‘May events’ of 1968, who found themselves not in a world of liberated humanity, but instead in an age of barbarism. They moved from Marx to Nietzsche.” Giddens argues that this marks a philosophical conservatism that is mirrored by a

interrogated the primacy of consciousness or experience in conceptions of subjectivity and displaced the privilege of these terms by focusing on the body as a sociocultural artifact rather than as a manifestation or externalization of what is private, psychological, and “deep” in the individual.³¹

This is, broadly speaking, the theoretical background of this work. I have chosen to look at the way the body is actively produced through inscription, which marks the body in historically and culturally specific ways. This use of theories of inscription (specifically the work of Michel Foucault who will be looked at in detail shortly) to understand fat female bodies in contemporary, post-colonial societies is a deliberate choice made in the face of dominant discourses that reduce women to either biological bodies or psychological problems.

The focus on Foucauldian theories necessarily means the exclusion of other theories of the body, and to this end I have left aside the large quantity of French feminist and feminist psycho-analytic work on the body carried out by Luce Irigaray, Helene Cixous and Julia Kristeva among others, who draw on the works of most notably Freud, Lacan and Derrida. Psychoanalysis has been extremely influential in the area of film criticism in particular, and literary studies more generally. A substantial amount of work on so-called eating disorders and female bodies has been developed by these writers and others through the application of their theories.³²

political conservatism in “the west”. *Politics, Sociology and Social Theory: encounters with classical and contemporary thought* (Cambridge & Oxford: Polity Press, 1995), p. 260 and p. 259.

³¹ Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, p. 115.

³² Works by Luce Irigaray include *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian Gill (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1985) and *This Sex Which is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter with Carolyn Burke (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1985); see Helene Cixous “The Laugh of the Medusa” in Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Coutrivron (eds), *New French Feminisms* (Amerherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980) pp. 245–64.

Julia Kristeva, for example, also uses the work of anthropologist Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, for her own text on “abjection”, *Power of Horror*.³³ Where Douglas provides an anthropological examination of culture and taboo as it affects and constructs the body, Kristeva shifts the analysis to a psychological one. In keeping with the materialist, inscriptive theoretical approach of this thesis I have chosen to concentrate on the sociological rather than the psychological as a deliberate attempt to maintain a specific politics of the body. I look to Douglas rather than Kristeva, and theories of inscription in general rather than psychoanalysis. To this extent, although Kristeva’s work, for example, may be influential and informative, it has been left aside in order to more fully develop the focus on the fat female body as a figure written upon and shaped by regimes of power, by discourse and culture. The very fabric of the body, size, shape and soul is subject to the active, ongoing influence and pressures of dominant discourses through its lifetime.

Among the theorists of bodily inscription Foucault’s ideas in particular have been very influential. Foucauldian theories of bodily inscription provide a compelling means to understand the processes by which so many women are affected by the negative self-images, and endless searches for ways to improve their (inadequate) bodies. In this paradigm the processes by which the female body is shaped are understood to be culturally determined and written on the body.

According to Foucault,

the body is also directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs.³⁴

³³ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: an analysis of concepts of pollutions and taboo* (London & New York: Routledge, 1994) and Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: an essay on abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia UP, 1982).

³⁴ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: the birth of the prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Allen Lane/ Penguin, 1977), p. 25.

Bodies are inscribed with specific cultural, social and political meanings in the interests of production and control. Inscription is carried out through discourse, “sets of ‘deep principles’ incorporating specific ‘grids of meaning’ which underpin, generate and establish relations between all that can be seen, thought and said.”³⁵ Knowledges underpin discursive inscription, being an instrument of power and the means by which specific bodies are validated and perpetuated. Thus “knowledge is one of the conduits by which power is able to seize hold of bodies, to entwine itself into desires and practices”.³⁶ Foucault wrote that bodies are shaped as useful through the construction of malleable or docile forms, and “[a] body is docile that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved.”³⁷ These subjected figures are produced through disciplines, and moreover, “the body becomes a useful force only if it is both a productive body and a subjected body.”³⁸ Through disciplines such as diet and exercise, the intelligible form is inscribed upon the lived actual body, thereby making it useful. In capitalist terms this means it is a productive and efficient body. In this way culture is embodied, and the ideal is translated into the everyday, and normalised.

In Foucauldian terms the body is all surface, inscribed with a subjectivity that constructs an interiority, and “[i]t is power which produces a ‘soul’ or interiority as a result of a certain type of etching of the subject’s body.”³⁹ In this way discourses are naturalised; aspects of femininity are, for example, understood as biological. This apparent demonstration or expression of interiority, however, is itself the product of a cultural inscription which obscures the act of inscription:

[t]he displacement of a political and discursive origin of gender identity onto a psychological “core” precludes an analysis of the

³⁵ Chris Shilling, *The Body and Social Theory*, p. 75.

³⁶ Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, p. 148.

³⁷ Paul Rabinow (ed), *The Foucault Reader* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin, 1987), p. 180.

³⁸ Paul Rabinow (ed), *The Foucault Reader*, p. 173.

political construction of the gendered subject and its fabricated notions about the ineffable interiority of its sex or of its true identity.⁴⁰

Foucault has been criticised for his presumption of a universal masculine body, and his elision of the specificity of gendered female experience:

Foucault treats the body throughout as if it were one, as if the bodily experiences of men and women did not differ and as if men and women bore the same relationship to the characteristic institutions of modern life. Where is the account of the disciplinary practices that engender the “docile bodies” of women, bodies more docile than the bodies of men?⁴¹

Significantly female-specific disciplines are largely separate from the institutions identified by Foucault in *Discipline and Punish*: the prison, school or hospital. Although exercise regimens may shape women’s bodies, the programme is not compulsory. Bartky writes:

Foucault tends to identify the imposition of discipline upon the body with the operation of specific institutions, for example, the school, the factory, the prison. To do this, however, is to overlook the extent to which discipline can be institutionally *unbound* as well as institutionally bound.⁴²

³⁹ Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, p. 149.

⁴⁰ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: feminism and the subversion of identity* (New York & London: Routledge, 1990), p. 136.

⁴¹ Sandra Bartky, “Foucault, femininity” in Irene Diamond & Lee Quinby (eds), pp. 63–64.

⁴² Sandra Bartky, “Foucault, femininity” in Irene Diamond & Lee Quinby (eds), p. 75. Italics in original.

In a departure from Foucault, Bartky goes on to identify female disciplinary practices that are discursively positioned as voluntary. This identification of practices that are directed at women and that are not institutional, marks a distinct change from Foucauldian theory.

Many of the disciplines associated with contemporary femininity are to do with managing body size and shape. The docile, useful female body is one that has particular dimensions, although these dimensions change according to political and economic contexts. A woman's participation in many aspects of society is determined by her ability to adhere to this prescribed femininity, and the attainment of the perfect body is increasingly the measure of a woman's worth.⁴³

Feminist writers such as Sandra Bartky and Susan Bordo among others, have gendered the Foucauldian body, and used Foucauldian theories of docility and normative disciplinary techniques to investigate the current association of femininity with slimness, and the increasing demands placed upon the appearance of the female body. They place particular emphasis on the disciplines that inscribe the contemporary Western female body.

But theories of docility have also been criticised on the grounds that they re-establish oppression. When used to explain the "tyranny of slenderness", for example, docility leaves women disempowered and trapped within a cultural passivity. Coupled with "Foucault's anti-humanism [that] dismisses consciousness as a mode of active resistance to power's alignment", docility offers little hope for women to change their lives.⁴⁴ Lois McNay questions the "reduction of individuals to docile bodies", arguing

⁴³ See Katherine Gilday, *The Famine Within* and Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth* for discussions of the way in which the contemporary image of the successful woman adheres to specific dimensions and specific practices of femininity. Wolf describes the "professional beauty qualification" which affects the securing of paid work or career advancement, and rests largely on the types of clothes women can wear within the work place and how much or how little of their bodies are revealed in the "professional" space. The shape and age of the body is fundamental to treatment within the work place also. Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth*, p. 43.

⁴⁴ Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, p. 147.

that it “leads to an underestimation of the significance of the freedoms that women have won in modern society.”⁴⁵ McNay says of Foucault:

By depicting the development of modern power as an increasingly insidious form of domination and by obscuring any lifeworld context which may organize and regulate the exercise of power, Foucault retroactively effaces the specific nature of female subordination and overestimates the normalizing effects of disciplinary power in industrial society.⁴⁶

She concludes that, “Foucault’s understanding of individuals as docile bodies has the effect of pushing women back into this position of passivity and silence.”⁴⁷

For Anthony Giddens, the lack of agency within Foucauldian theories, and the tendency to theorise “history without *knowledgable human subjects*”, are serious limitations. Giddens writes:

Foucault and those influenced in a more uninhibited way by Nietzsche were right to insist that power was chronically and inevitably involved in all social processes... But we should not be seduced by a Nietzschean radicalization of power, which elevates it to the prime position in action and in discourse. Power then becomes a mysterious phenomenon, that hovers everywhere, and underlies everything.⁴⁸

These criticisms are levelled at both Foucauldian theories and feminist employment of them. Bartky and Bordo have been criticised for underestimating the ways

⁴⁵ Lois McNay, “Foucault, feminism and the body” in *The Polity Reader in Social Theory* (Polity Press, 1994), p. 197.

⁴⁶ Lois McNay, “Foucault, feminism and the body” in *The Polity Reader*, p. 199.

⁴⁷ Lois McNay, “Foucault, feminism and the body” in *The Polity Reader*, p. 200.

⁴⁸ Anthony Giddens, *Politics, Sociology and Social Theory*, p. 268.

in which women negotiate or interact with the disciplinary practices of contemporary femininity. Bartky maintains that

[t]he woman who checks her make-up half a dozen times a day to see if her foundation has caked or her mascara has run, who worries that the wind or the rain may spoil her hairdo, who looks frequently to see if her stockings have bagged at the ankle or who, feeling fat, monitors everything she eats, has become, just as surely as the inmate of the Panopticon, a self-policing subject, a self committed to a relentless self-surveillance. This self-surveillance is a form of obedience to patriarchy.⁴⁹

Although Bordo and Bartky's work provides useful insights into the ways in which women maintain femininity, they have a tendency to present women as passive.⁵⁰ Emphasis falls on the "obedience" to Western patriarchy rather than on the ways women negotiate competing pressures.

Despite providing a fruitful set of theories for the exploration of culturalisation, Foucault's theories pose problems for Monique Deveaux, for example, who argues that

the paradigms of power and the treatment of the subject which emerge from Foucault's work are inadequate for feminist projects that take the delineation of women's oppression and the concrete transformation of society as central aims.⁵¹

Deveaux goes on to suggest another difficulty for the feminist mobilisation of Foucauldian theories, and criticises Judith Butler in particular for her use of Foucauldian

⁴⁹ Sandra Bartky, "Foucault, Femininity" in Irene Diamond & Lee Quinby (eds), p. 81.

⁵⁰ For criticism of both Sandra Bartky and Susan Bordo see Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*; Monique Deveaux, "Feminism and empowerment: a critical reading of Foucault" *Feminist Studies* 20:2 Summer (1994), pp. 223–47; Lois McNay, "Foucault, feminism".

⁵¹ Monique Deveaux, "Feminism and empowerment", pp. 223–24.

ideas to “deconstruct the very notion of woman.”⁵² Butler argues that “[g]enders can be neither true nor false, neither real nor apparent, original nor derived.”⁵³ This, according to Deveaux, ultimately defeats any attempt to develop a politics of sex or sexual preference, maintaining that “despite their initial appeal, Foucault’s accounts of the subject and power may contradict the aspirations of those who would mobilise around common, if contingent, identities.”⁵⁴

Foucauldian theories of the body and cultural inscription offer a useful insight into the production of specific female bodies, and an effective means to counter the language of natural, biological femininity. Moreover, theories of inscription allow the demystifying of cultural practices that shape the body. It must be noted, however, that Foucault’s ideas about the body changed through the course of his lifetime, and the theorising of the “docile body” is drawn from Foucault’s earlier writing.⁵⁵ Furthermore, the theories of inscription have to be employed with caution and in tandem with an analysis of material, physical and social experience. The notion of cultural inscription and the docile body, then, is the starting point of an exploration of the fat female body. The focus of this thesis is upon bodies that expand beyond the docile body, and the cultural responses to expansive forms, because “[t]he ‘docile bodies’ which Foucault said discipline produced turn out very often to be not so docile at all”.⁵⁶

The docile body is not attainable for many women (especially with increasingly arduous regimens of body shaping) and is rejected by other groups of women. But the outsized and non-compliant body is the focus of much social attention and comment, as their transgression has either to be contained or dismissed. By looking at the female

⁵² Monique Deveaux, “Feminism and empowerment”, p. 237.

⁵³ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 141.

⁵⁴ Monique Deveaux, “Feminism and empowerment”, p. 237.

⁵⁵ Monique Deveaux in “Feminism and empowerment” outlines what she terms the three waves of feminist uses of Foucauldian theories, and the periods of Foucauldian writing that these waves are drawn from.

⁵⁶ Anthony Giddens, *Politics, Sociology and Social Theory*, p. 266.

body, and especially the large substantial body, I am focusing on transgression: the point of discursive disruption. It is by looking at the aberrant, the extreme, or the excessive, that the so-called normal is thrown into relief.

As argued previously, the contemporary female body is constructed through regimens of fashion, diet and fitness that are gender specific, maintaining and reproducing gendered, reduced, docile bodies. Underpinning these disciplinary discourses are the knowledges of health and medicine. These knowledges that determine truths or falsities maintain the legitimacy of disciplinary practices. Consequently the contemporary focus on “fitness” and “toning” is underpinned by the medical promotion of fitness as a health issue. Similarly, the tagging of specific foods or elements within diets as bad (or fattening), is accompanied by an ideology of diet and nutrition, that promotes specific eating patterns as being healthier than others.⁵⁷

Intersecting with these discourses are race, class, ethnicity and age, which impact upon the way the body is inscribed, read, or lived, and as such any theorising of fatness must incorporate an understanding of these complex inter-relationships, and the ways in which they shape representations of the body. Similarly, the physical context of the body affects inscription and the nature of the transgression. I have chosen to limit this study to the geographical boundaries of New Zealand, Australia and Canada. These three countries share a common history of colonisation, with attendant patterns of immigration, economic management and formation of national consciousness within the bounds of the British Commonwealth. Comparative work on Australia and Canada is a dynamic field, but it is not so usual to include New Zealand, with a few notable exceptions.⁵⁸ Often New Zealand and Australia are run together as two parts of a whole. By using Australia, Canada and New Zealand I not only wanted to move beyond a “bi-national” focus, and highlight the similarities between all three countries, but also mark out the distinctions

⁵⁷ See Shelley Bovey, *Being Fat*, for a discussion of the way in which the health discourses underpin gendered access to foods.

⁵⁸ See for example, Terry Goldie, *Fear and Temptation: the image of the indigene in Canadian, Australian, and New Zealand literatures* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's UP, 1989).

between them. Fat female bodies have different meanings and configurations in New Zealand, Australia and Canada, yet at the same time there are similarities that are significant, and point towards an expression of femininity that goes beyond national borders.

The history of colonisation is an important factor affecting the inscription and construction of the docile female body; furthermore, colonialism and post-colonialism are important aspects of the political and social context of the three countries. In *The Empire Writes Back*, post-colonialism is used as a term

to cover all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day. This is because there is a continuity of preoccupations throughout the historical process initiated by European imperial aggression.⁵⁹

Bob Hodge and Vijay Mishra, however, point out the limitations of the definition of post-colonialism, arguing that

“postcolonialism” as the period that follows a stage of colonisation is not necessarily subversive, and in most cases it incorporates much from its colonial past. By not distinguishing between oppositional postcolonialism and complicit postcolonialism, Ashcroft et al create a misleading impression that subversion reigns equally everywhere in all “postcolonial” societies.⁶⁰

I use post-colonialism to indicate an engagement with a problematising of colonial narratives, and “to critique and replace the institutions and practices of colonialism

⁵⁹ Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths & Helen Tiffin (eds), *The Empire Writes Back: theory and practice in post-colonial literatures* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 2.

⁶⁰ Bob Hodge and Vijay Mishra, *Dark Side of the Dream: Australian literature and the postcolonial mind* (North Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1990), pp. xi–xii.

whether of a traditional or contemporary nature.”⁶¹ The term “settler society” is also used to highlight the fact that Australia, New Zealand and Canada were appropriated by the British Empire, and that colonisation is ongoing within them.⁶²

The relationship between women and colonialism is complex. Anne Summers wrote in 1975 that

there are some similarities between the position of women in a patriarchal society such as Australia and that of a colonized people. Both are denied self-determination, and both spend their lives working to enhance the power and wealth of a group to which they can never belong. But this similarity extends much further than has been previously recognised. To say that women are a colonized group is no metaphor. It is a salient political

⁶¹ Paul Spoonley, “The challenges of post-colonialism” *Sites* 30 Autumn (1995), p. 49.

⁶² Paul Spoonley writes that “a neo-imperialism or neo-colonialism can be said to exist alongside elements of a traditional colonialism” (“The challenges of post-colonialism”, p. 49). The area of post-colonial theory is contested and at times controversial. There is considerable ongoing debate over the differences (if any) between post-modernism and post-colonialism, and the reimposition of Eurocentrism by post-colonial critics for example. For general discussions of post-colonialism see: Christopher Gittings, “A Collision of Discourse: postmodernisms and postcolonialisms in *The Biggest Modern Woman of the World*” *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 29:1 (1994), pp. 81–91; Chris Tiffin and Alan Lawson (eds), *De-scribing Empire: post-colonialism and textuality* (London & New York: Routledge, 1994); Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage, 1993); Anne McClintock, “The Angel of progress: pitfalls of the term ‘post-colonialism’” *Social Text* 31:2 (1992), pp. 84–98; I. Adam & H. Tiffin, *Past the Last Post: theorizing post-colonialism and post-modernism* (Hemel Hemstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991); Anne Maxwell, “The Debate on Current Theories of Colonial Discourse” *Kunapipi* 13:3 (1991), pp. 70–84; Homi K. Bhabha, *Nation and Narration* (London: Routledge, 1990); Graham Huggan, “Philomela’s Retold Story: silence, music, and the postcolonial text” *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 25:1 1990, pp. 12–23; G. Spivak, *The Post-Colonial Critic* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Bill Ashcroft, “The post-colonial re-vision of Australian literature” *New Literatures Review* 18 Winter South (1989), pp. 1–9; Stephen Slemon, “Post-colonial allegory and the transformation of history” *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, xxiii:1 (1988), pp. 157–68; Helen Tiffin, “Post-colonial literatures and counter-discourse” *Kunapipi*, 9:3 (1987), pp. 17–34; Simon During “Postmodernism or Postcolonialism?” *Landfall* 155 39:3 Sept (1985), pp. 366–80; Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 1978).

description of women in industrialized countries like Australia, if not of all women everywhere.⁶³

Though this recognition of women's gender-based colonisation is important, it is necessary to recognise other factors that also impact upon the experience of colonisation. The universalising of women's experience risks the elision and appropriation of a variety of women's experiences. Laura Donaldson argues that the image of the colonised woman

possesses undeniable power in articulating the oppression of many women; yet, it is also symptomatic of what Homi K. Bhabha calls an imperialist cross-referencing that denies the metonymy of the colonial moment.⁶⁴

She goes on to argue that, as well as subsuming specific experiences within a universal woman's experience, the presentation of women and colonisation is based on a

women=colonized, man=colonizer metaphor [that] lacks any awareness of gender — or colonialism, for that matter — as a contested field, an overdetermined sociopolitical grip whose identity points are often contradictory.⁶⁵

It is important, therefore, to acknowledge that colonisation is a gendered activity — with a feminised landscape often providing the necessary backdrop for the construction of national masculine identity — without underestimating the roles of women in the processes of colonisation, and the range of inscription of different female bodies by colonial discourses.

⁶³ Anne Summers, *Damned Whores and God's Police: the colonialization of women in Australia* (Melbourne: Penguin, 1985), p. 199. This was one of the first major monograph studies of women in Australian history.

⁶⁴ Laura E. Donaldson, *Decolonizing Feminisms: race, gender and empire-building* (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 5–6.

⁶⁵ Laura E. Donaldson, *Decolonizing Feminisms*, p. 6.

An example of this mediated inscription of women's bodies is the discourse of maternity. In the revised edition of *Damned Whores and God's Police* Anne Summers writes of Australia that the "main purpose of colonisation is to ensure that women will continue to reproduce."⁶⁶ This privileged reproduction is, as Summers points out, contained within "the family". Concerns over the economic future of Australia have often been expressed through the language of population, with Australians being called on to "populate or perish".⁶⁷

Coupled with intensified interest in maternity was a greater surveillance of the society through census gathering, analysis of statistics, and even a commission of inquiry into the birthrate.⁶⁸ Incentives to encourage maternity, however, were selective and exclusive. Increased population may have been the goal, but the make-up of the population was to be strictly controlled. White middle-class women were encouraged to have children, whilst Aboriginal women (along with white working-class women at certain periods) were not. Marie de Lepervanche points out that "[b]oth Asian and Aboriginal women were excluded from the 'universalist' maternity allowance of 1912", and therefore not seen as mothers of the new nation.⁶⁹ Thus the bodies of women were inscribed according to race and class, not simply sex.

Racism was fundamental to the inscription of the maternal body, with concern expressed by white Australian settlers in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries over the population rates of Aboriginal peoples, resulting in the establishment of the New South Wales Aborigines' Protection Board in 1883. This board was instrumental in the

⁶⁶ Anne Summers, *Damned Whores and God's Police* (revised edition) (Ringwood, Victoria: Penguin, 1994), p. 246.

⁶⁷ Marie de Lepervanche, "The family: in the national interest?" in Gill Bottomley, Marie de Lepervanche & Jeannie Martin (eds), *Intersexions: Gender/Class/Culture/Ethnicity* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1991), p. 132.

⁶⁸ Marie de Lepervanche, "The family: in the national interest?" in Gill Bottomley, Marie de Lepervanche & Jeannie Martin (eds), p. 132.

⁶⁹ Marie de Lepervanche, "The family: in the national interest?" in Gill Bottomley, Marie de Lepervanche & Jeannie Martin (eds), p. 150

removal of Aboriginal children from their communities and families, under the 1909 *Aboriginies' Protection Act* and later amendments. Similar organisations were established in each of the Australian states. Furthermore, while there had been a focus upon white fertility and encouragement of increased rates of childbirth, there had been a concurrent emphasis upon the limitation of the Aboriginal woman's fertility. This differential treatment has continued well into the twentieth century. Marie de Lepervanche writes that

[d]espite the reforms introduced since the 1970s, the ideology of family has been associated with some very curious contemporary twists which should not be obscured by rhetoric about greater equality for women of all backgrounds. For instance, despite all the talk of expanding population by immigration, family reunion and natural increase, reports have surfaced in the press that some Aboriginal and poorer immigrant women have been administered the controversial contraceptive drug Depo Provera, not always with their informed consent... This method of controlling the fertility of certain disadvantaged women provides a marked contrast to the huge sums spent on IVF programs....⁷⁰

White working-class women's experiences were different again. Although in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries it was perceived by the dominant class that the working classes "breed too fast", they were included within the eugenicist maternalism of the White Australia policies.⁷¹ Nevertheless, there are significantly different discursive effects upon the bodies of working-class women. In *Time of Our Lives* Mike Donaldson argues that

[w]omen's biology is mediated by class. It is not only that working-class women have their children earlier, have more

70 Marie de Lepervanche, "The family: in the national interest?" in Gill Bottomley, Marie de Lepervanche & Jeannie Martin (eds), p. 151.

children and have more unplanned children, but they have different attitudes to childbirth during pregnancy, different experiences during childbirth and different post-partum evaluations of their childbirth experience. They have higher acute symptoms, higher chronic symptoms and worse mental health than women in other classes. They tend to have not only more menopausal symptoms but more severe symptoms than other women... They weigh more and exercise less.⁷²

Women's bodies, therefore, are inscribed with social meaning through a number of discourses. Differences in the interpretation of the maternal body in colonial Australia reveal the factors that intersect with sex to mark and train the body to adhere to particular features. As Lynette Finch argues in *The Classing Gaze*, "discourse has effect — boundaries are policed, class groupings receive different treatment and are incarcerated in a specialised range of institutions."⁷³ Racial and ethnic groups receive different treatment, and the history of colonisation has had a differential impact. It becomes clear that the idealised body itself is a representation of specific class, race and cultural factors.

In this thesis the body addressed is a textual one. Literature is a means by which to illuminate the discursive practices of society. It is the site where metaphor, genre and language present, reproduce, and challenge dominant ideologies. It is fitting, then, to ground a study of the discursive inscription of body within literature. By contextualising literature within historical and cultural debates, it becomes possible to see the way in which the body at the centre of a text is constructed and positioned with regard to a

⁷¹ Marie de Lepervanche, "The family: in the national interest?" in Gill Bottomley, Marie de Lepervanche & Jeannie Martin (eds), p. 150.

⁷² Mike Donaldson, *Time Of Our Lives: labour and loves in the working class* (North Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1991), p. 32.

⁷³ Lynette Finch, *The Classing Gaze: sexuality, class and surveillance* (St Leonards, Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1993), p. 15.

number of competing discourses. It is also possible to identify the ways in which the feminine body is inscribed by, and negotiates, the processes of cultural inscription. Fat and thin, then, are inscribed upon literary figures in a similar manner as upon “actual” lived bodies. The meanings of characters’ bodies, or aspects of their personalities, are conveyed through the size and shape of their bodies.⁷⁴

But as Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins argue, “the body also *moves*”, and it is for this reason that I have included the film *Sweetie* within a thesis otherwise focusing on written texts.⁷⁵ The visual medium provides a space within which to view the processes of inscription and transgression. On “the big screen” bodies are enlarged, exaggerated and thus impossible to overlook; the impact of an outsized body is even greater. Outsized bodies are, however, contained within narrative structures that confine and limit them, and

in representing ourselves to ourselves, as film and television do, these media are constantly (re)introducing and reinforcing the assumptions, beliefs, values and ideologies, by and from which our society is constructed.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ This is illustrated by two well-known examples. In both Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1982) (1st published 1847) and Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* (London: Penguin, 1985) (1st published 1847), the bodies of both female and male characters are encoded with moral, sexual and political meanings. The location of class and race within bodies (Jane Eyre and Bertha Rochester in *Jane Eyre* and Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights*) is as challenging today as it was when they were first published.

For contemporary examples of the politicising of bodies and the location of moral and cultural meanings through the size and shape of the body see the following novels: Elizabeth Jolley, *Foxbaby* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1990) and *Miss Peabody’s Inheritance* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1983); Janet Frame, *Living in the Maniototo* (London: Women’s Press in association with Hutchinson group NZ, 1981); Joan Barfoot, *Duet For Three* (London: The Women’s Press, 1986); Patricia Grace, *Cousins* (Auckland: Penguin, 1992).

⁷⁵ Helen Gilbert & Joanne Tompkins, *Post-Colonial Drama: theory, practice, politics* (London & New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 203. Italics in original.

⁷⁶ Anne Cranny-Francis, “The moving image, film and television” in Gunther Kress (ed), *Communication and Culture* (Kensington: New South Wales UP, 1988), p. 158.

In other words, the visual image is a powerful medium through which to affect, reflect, or challenge notions of “ourselves”.

The inscription of the docile body is enacted on the screen. In mainstream productions privileged feminine qualities are validated whilst those deemed unacceptable are punished. The ideal woman is confirmed time and time again in popular films as passive and dependent. The amount of energy or assertion she is allowed to show depends on the current fashions as well as the genre. Linda Hamilton and Sigourney Weaver, for example, were able to play strong and muscular characters in the North American films *Terminator 2* (1991) and the series of *Alien* films — *Alien* (1979), *Aliens* (1986), *Alien 3* (1992) and now *Alien: Resurrection* (1997) — because they fulfilled the role of the monstrous maternal, protecting children, either their own or humanity's.⁷⁷ Similarly, *Thelma and Louise* (1991) allowed what was for North American mainstream cinema a radical (almost feminist) feminising of the road movie. The price of freedom for these characters is, however, the familiar death of outsized women, and thus the film remains a version of the cautionary tale.⁷⁸

The size of the female body in film is very important, and the dimensions of the leading female character are often fundamental to the story being told. In the screen adaptation of the New Zealand writer Janet Frame's autobiography, Jane Campion's *An Angel at my Table* (1990), a plump figure is used to position the character historically as well as be a visual representation of the marginalised, and painfully shy writer. Marginality and awkwardness is again located in a plump body in Paul J. Hogan's *Muriel's Wedding* (1994). Conversely in another Campion film, *The Piano* (1993), the central character's repressed and restricted existence is expressed through her slight, fragile body as well as through her inability to speak. In Gillian Armstrong's *The Last Days of Chez Nous* (1992), the pregnant body and the bulimic body are momentarily

⁷⁷ The latest in the *Alien* series, *Alien: Resurrection* is, if anything, even more explicit with regard to the maternal themes.

⁷⁸ Margaret Miles, *Seeing and Believing: religion and values in the movies* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), p. 140.

interchangeable as a character stuffs handfuls of rich chocolate cake into her mouth before rushing to the bathroom to throw up. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to provide a detailed analysis of film theory and criticism, but this work would not have been complete without a chapter on the specific version of the fat body that is highly visible in film: the monstrous female body.

In the following chapters I explore the contradictions and complexities of fat bodies. The thesis is organised around different images and expressions of fatness. Each chapter has a specific thematic and textual focus that in total develops the meanings of fatness, revealing the extent to which the fat body is a site of contestation and conflict, as well as being a body that expands beyond the docile female figure. In the following six chapters selected films and novels from Australia, Canada and New Zealand are positioned within cultural, political and national contexts that impact upon the meanings of fatness.

Chapter two focuses on a monstrous fat body and the discursive construction of an outsized and anarchic body using the Australian film *Sweetie* (1989), directed by Jane Campion. Both the screenplay and the film are cited in this chapter. The character Sweetie dominates the story through her large, uncompromising body, and as such her body amplifies the disturbing and concealed aspects of normal suburban family life. In this chapter I look at the relationship between Sweetie's monstrous body and the domestic and romantic discourses that she disrupts. Sweetie represents a fat female body that is contained within madness and monstrosity, but at the same time the film itself displaces this discursive containment. Sweetie is an outsized woman who is monstrous in body and action.

In chapter three I move to the first of the four chapters that use novels to explore the body. This chapter uses two novels by Canadian writer Margaret Atwood to examine the types of bodies that become fat by expanding beyond the parameters of the ideal or contemporarily celebrated figure: mature-age and pregnant bodies. Rather than being monstrous bodies these bodies become fat through their transgression of socially-approved shapes. Pregnancy and mature-age forms are bodies that grow beyond the slim-

line feminine, and as such are interpreted as fat. The interaction between the mature-age and pregnant women and the central characters in these two novels reveal the way the female body becomes fat discursively.

From pregnant and mature-age bodies I move to a body that transgresses expectations of the slim-line, classed, racialised body through a disruption of the distinctions between male and female, and Maori and Pakeha ("white" New Zealander). In this fourth chapter, on the New Zealand novel *the bone people* by Keri Hulme, I look at the way in which the body of the principal character, Kerewin Holmes, transgresses not only the docile body, but also codes of femininity, through solidity and strength. Furthermore, this outsized body also disrupts the easy separation of bodies along racial/racist lines. In this novel the transgression becomes rebellion, a visible and active disruption of raced docility.

In chapter five I return to a more conventional overweight body in the Australian novel *Lilian's Story*, by Kate Grenville. I look at the way the body of Lilian Singer is situated within particular discourses in an Australian context because of her physical expansion beyond acceptable limits. Her physical growth is associated with an expansion beyond particular classed parameters, and reveals the way in which the docile body is also a classed body.

In chapter six I turn again to a Canadian body that transgresses the boundaries of docility, by looking at Susan Swan's *The Biggest Modern Woman of the World*. This novel marks a departure from any alignment of empowerment and fatness, as the fat, or rather gigantic, body of Anna Swan is dissected by science, silenced by history, and contained by the discourse of docile femininity. I look at the conundrum of the invisible giant in this chapter.

Finally, in chapter seven, "Embodying the Nation", I move beyond close textual analysis. In this chapter I show how in the political environments of Australia, New Zealand and Canada, fatness and transgression are contextual. Building on the range of fat bodies already identified, I step away from the individual body to look at the way post-colonial settler societies construct images of themselves that are attached to specific

bodies. By expanding upon the previous analysis of three texts, *Lilian's Story*, *the bone people* and *The Biggest Modern Woman of the World*, all of which have been understood as novels in some part about nation, I position them within their nationalist frames, and examine the ways in which images of national bodies impact upon female bodies.

In total these chapters look at a range of fat bodies, and the complex contradictory way in which they are inscribed by, and in turn reinscribe, social, political and cultural discourses. Fat female bodies are much more than overweight bodies, as they expand beyond socially-determined femininity and amplify the practices that create subjected bodies: these are bodies that disrupt stereotype and expectation through expansion, excess and fat.

Chapter Two

The monster that is *Sweetie*

“I decided to make a film about love and romance, sex and family. I wanted to provoke, but at the same time to touch people.”¹ This is precisely what Jane Campion did with her first feature-length film, *Sweetie* (1989). The film, co-written with Gerard Lee, and directed by Jane Campion, won the Australian Film Industry (AFI) Byron Kennedy Award for excellence, as well as the best original screenplay of the year.²

Response to the film, however, has been mixed. According to Australian film critic David Stratton *Sweetie* is an

extraordinarily audacious and witty film, but it polarised audiences in a remarkable way. At Cannes, where it was invited to compete, it was almost as badly received, by some sections of the audience as *Bliss* had been.³

Stratton found it problematic that *Sweetie* was not nominated for either the best film or best director at the 1989 AFI awards, since in his opinion “*Sweetie* (1989) was one of the best

¹ Jane Campion, speaking in an interview with David Stratton about the film *Sweetie*, Jane Campion dir., (prod. Australia: Arenafilm, 1989), in David Stratton, *The Avocado Plantation* (Sydney: Pan MacMillan, 1990), p. 373.

² The film also won the Georges Sadoul Prize in 1989 for Best Foreign Film, the LA Film Critics’ New Generation Award in 1990, the American Independent Spirit Award for Best Foreign Feature and the Australian Critics’ Award for Best Film, Best Director and Best Actress. See Jane Campion, *The Piano* (London: Bloomsbury, 1993), p. 155.

³ David Statton, *The Avocado Plantation*, p. 375.

feature films of the decade...".⁴ The film, nevertheless, did have a wide international release, and received some glowing reviews, but according to one critic, "Sweetie forever multiplies its themes, and drifts in such a way that it constantly displaces its centre of interest...", and it was this that posed a challenge to audiences.⁵ The content and style of the production has proved just as provocative as Campion intended.

This film is confronting in part because of the monstrous woman who dominates the screen. Sweetie's (Genevieve Lemon) body is large and uncontained, and at times she appears animalistic and deranged, especially when compared to the neatness of her quiet sister, Kay (Karen Colston). The two sisters at the film's centre, Dawn or Sweetie and Kay, amplify each other's archetypal forms, being the fatty and skinny, the whore and virgin, of patriarchal femininity. These are familiar forms, and as Margaret Miles writes,

[h]istorical representations of women cluster around two images; women are either romanticized and glamorized — like the Virgin Mary and countless film stars — or they are pictured as daughters of Eve, cause of the evils of sex, sin and death.⁶

Central to the screen presentation of these two characters is their relationship to food, each other and sex. This film is not a traditional patriarchal text, however, and the bodies of Sweetie and Kay transgress stereotypes by expanding beyond the docile feminine form. *Sweetie's* ambiguous ending reveals the extent to which the apparent adherence to an historical patriarchal representation of women is, in fact, a transgression that is in itself monstrous. The body for discussion in this chapter is the visible body of film that confronts

⁴ David Stratton, *The Avocado Plantation*, p. 373.

⁵ Anne-Marie Crawford & Adrian Martin, "SWEETIE", *Cinema Papers* 75 September (1989), p. 56.

⁶ Margaret Miles, *Seeing and Believing*, p. 136.

the viewing audience — the familiar “monstrous-feminine” — and the contextualising of Champion’s version of this monstrous-feminine body, Sweetie, within melodrama, romance and incest.

Barbara Creed writes that “[a]ll human societies have a conception of the monstrous-feminine, of what it is about woman that is shocking, terrifying, horrific, abject”.⁷ The presence of this horrific figure in film is a common enough occurrence, and as Creed points out, horror films are populated with monstrous women from “archaic mother” to “*femme castratrice*”.⁸ Creed criticises a psychoanalytic-feminist preoccupation with woman as the victim of monstrous-male attacks in film and the focus on melodrama, as reinforcing a passive construction of femininity, and looks instead to horror films as a genre that provides a representation of woman as active.⁹ The distortion or disfigurement of a docile feminine body is a characteristic of the horror film, as the body itself is the site of monstrosity, but it can also simply be the material quality of the female body that renders it monstrous.

The encoding of the female body as monstrous or evil is fundamental to Christian patriarchal societies, and, “[m]any medieval paintings and sculptures represented original sin as a naked, corpulent woman with pendulous breasts.”¹⁰ Monstrous bodies can also be found outside of horror films, and I want to return to melodrama, where

[t]he social sphere of the family provides a ready-made *dramatis personae* of characters whose relations are by very definition

⁷ Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: film, feminism, psychoanalysis* (London & New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 1.

⁸ Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, p. 7.

⁹ Barbara Creed cautions that “active” does not necessarily equate with “feminist” or “liberated”, and that the representation of women in horror films says more about patriarchy than it does about women. Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, p. 7

overdetermined and overlaid with tension and contradiction, destined to act out Oedipal drama, generational conflict, sibling rivalry, the containment and repression of sexuality.¹¹

Kathleen Rowe argues that melodrama provides a site where

the social contradictions of gender have been played out most compellingly in artistic forms centred on their victimization and tears rather than on their resistance and laughter: the domestic novel, the Gothic novel, the women's weepy film, the television soap opera, the made-for-TV movie.¹²

Coupled with the use of "Lacanian-based psychoanalysis" the focus on melodrama at the expense of other genres, "which position women as subjects of a laughter that expresses anger, resistance, solidarity, and joy", has tended to leave feminist film analysis centred on loss and victimisation.¹³ The film *Sweetie*, however, as a version of a melodramatic film, contains a monstrous active body. The "naked, corpulent woman with pendulous breasts" is an image of Sweetie herself, and thus the familiar safe territory of melodrama is disrupted by anger, resistance, and as I argue later in this chapter, solidarity.

The challenge of representing an outsized female body that is transgressive and active on "the big screen" cannot be underestimated. In the film *Lilian's Story* (1995), based on Kate Grenville's novel of the same name, the fat body of Lilian is removed from the text. In chapter five I provide a detailed analysis of the fat body of Lilian

¹⁰ Margaret Miles, *Seeing and Believing*, p. 136.

¹¹ Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1989), pp. 73–74. For a definition of melodrama see Christine Gledhill, *Home is Where the Heart Is* (London: British Film Institute, 1987).

¹² Kathleen Rowe, *The Unruly Woman*, p. 4.

¹³ Kathleen Rowe, *The Unruly Woman*, p.4 and p. 5.

Singer, which I argue is intrinsic both to how Lilian is treated, and the events of her life. The reduction of Lilian to a “normal” figure both as the sensuous adolescent, played by Toni Colette, and the extravagant older woman, played by Ruth Cracknell, fundamentally changes the story as told in the novel. Although the translation of novel into film necessarily involves new emphases, the film version of Lilian’s life fails to communicate her voluptuous excess and corpulence, and contains her madness within a recognisable, readily understood, and safe body. The courage, then, of Campion in making *Sweetie* is considerable.

Sweetie is about Kay, a bank clerk, who falls in love with a colleague named Louis. The film traces the development of their relationship from initial passion to estrangement, ending on a hopeful note of reconciliation. Kay and Louis move in together but the relationship deteriorates, and Kay moves into a spare room. Kay’s sister, Sweetie, arrives at Kay’s home unexpectedly, with her producer/boyfriend, a “no-hoper” called Bob. They take up residence in Kay’s flat, much to her discomfort. Though the film begins with Kay, Sweetie takes it over. As Jane Campion said of the screenplay in its introduction, “...Sweetie emerged and started taking over. She just grew”.¹⁴ The other characters retreat from the all-consuming Sweetie, and are released only upon the event of her death.

Things are not happy in the family home of Kay’s parents, Flo and Gordon. Flo leaves her husband, Gordon, and becomes a cook in the outback. Gordon, lost without her, subsequently moves in with Kay, Louis, Sweetie and Bob, taking up residence in the only remaining space, the laundry.

Eventually Kay, Louis and Gordon plot to get rid of the “derelict” Bob, and then, leaving a distraught Sweetie at home, drive off to find Flo. Despite the fact that Flo is

¹⁴ Gerard Lee & Jane Campion, *Sweetie: the Screenplay* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1991), p. ix. All future references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

enjoying being cook and mother to a group of Jackaroos, she decides to return home with Gordon on the proviso that Sweetie is not to live with them. It is clear from the family responses to Sweetie, and the discussion in the car on the return journey, that Sweetie is the cause of considerable anxiety within the family. Despite Flo's desire to remove Sweetie from her home, the latter remains until her death very much embroiled in the day-to-day lives of the other family members.

Upon their return to the city Gordon, Flo and Sweetie leave Kay's home (Bob having already been deposited at a down-market coffee bar). They are closely followed by Louis. Kay and Louis are no longer sleeping together, and Louis finally loses patience with Kay's physical withdrawal, and moves out.

While anxiously awaiting a reconciliatory phone call from Louis, Kay receives an emergency call from Flo. Sweetie is holed up in a tree-house in her parent's backyard. She is naked, painted black, and swearing profusely at her parents. Kay drives around to her parents' home accompanied by her neighbour, the little boy Clayton (who Sweetie had got on well with), in the hope that the young boy will help get Sweetie "under control". But repeated attempts to get Sweetie down fail, and there is more trouble when Clayton is able to sneak up into the tree-house to join her. They both begin jumping vigorously up and down, and the tree-house crumbles beneath them. Although Clayton survives the fall, Sweetie suffers fatal injuries and dies despite Kay's desperate efforts to revive her. At the funeral, tree roots have to be cut out of the grave to allow the coffin to be lowered down. The final scene in the film takes place in Kay's bedroom. Louis is with Kay, and they are obviously beginning to renew their sexual relationship; Kay is relaxed and the tone is promising.

Sweetie is a film about family, the relationships within families, and the monstrosity that can lie at the heart of the familial unit. Within the film trees represent family: the family tree. From huge towering trees, to saplings, to seedlings, there are shadows and rustles, branches and roots, all through the film. *Sweetie* is structured

around the family of Kay, Sweetie, Flo and Gordon. Other characters impact upon the family and extend it, such as the daughters' lovers and Clayton, the child next door. The family tree in the backyard of Flo and Gordon's home (the family home) is a pivotal site of familial expression, and is experienced in a variety of ways, suggesting the contradiction and conflict inherent in families. The trees provide a visual (and aural) expression of discomfort, pleasure and contestation in front of which the bodies of Kay and Sweetie act out their emotions and desires.

There are diverse responses from the characters to the images of trees within the film. Kay has nightmares and horror visions of invasive trees, and associates them with sinister, uncomfortable emotions. When Louis plants a pepper sapling in the backyard, removing the Hills Hoist to do so, Kay cannot cope. She secretly removes the tree late one night. Louis, bereft, is unable to understand why anyone would take the tree, and his departure from Kay's flat is precipitated by the discovery of the dead sapling under Kay's bed.

The pepper tree as an image of family is troubling for Kay. Her removal of the sapling, that had displaced the washing line to occupy the central domestic space in the backyard, suggests an unease with the replication of relationships like that of her parents. It also marks a rejection of patriarchal family, which is most often typified by the family tree.¹⁵

Kay's discomfort with romance and family is communicated through her sexual retreat, exasperated tolerance of Clayton, and the visually discordant images that flash intermittently through her mind. One of her recurring images is of phallic seedlings

¹⁵ For a discussion of the historical, biblical and mythological links between women and trees see Lucy Dougan, "Women's Bodies and Metamorphosis: thoughts in Daphne's shade", in Hilary Fraser and R.S. White, *Constructing Gender: feminism and literary studies* (Nedlands, Western Australia: University of Western Australia Press, 1994), pp. 1-18.

which pervade her dreams. The discordant soundtrack intensifies the threat of the rapidly-growing seedlings. A violent and invasive image of the phallus is evoked with connotations of a man planting his seed, and the cliché of reaping what you sow.

Kay's fear of trees represents a material manifestation of her relationship with her own family. The film opens with a shot of the large tree in the backyard of the family home. This tree contained Sweetie's tree-house, a place once decorated with fairy lights where Kay had not been allowed to enter. With her arm across her face, Kay tells "us" (the audience) that she had always been afraid of trees. Moreover, Kay dreams of tree roots growing invasively beneath her bed. It is ironic, then, that it is under her bed that she hides the dead pepper tree. Kay's fear of trees is nonetheless vindicated by the ending of the film, which has Sweetie falling to her death from the tree-house.

By contrast, Flo is comforted by trees. She says to Louis in the backyard of Kay's home, "I can't imagine living without my trees, they give me hope. Imagine just air, earth, water, sun" (p. 45). Rather than being intimidated or threatened, Flo is reassured. Flo experiences the size, shadow and noise of the trees in a dramatically different way to Kay, suggesting a dramatically different experience of family. But whatever the differences of perception between members of the family, the family is seen through the trees. They relate to one another through the trees, and their bodies are framed and contained by the comforting and sinister, familiar and alien roots, leaves and branches. The meanings of the bodies of the two sisters, one fat and one thin, are amplified by the external sinew and fibre of the trees.

Kay and Sweetie can be understood as being the inverse of one another, quiet and loud, thin and fat. The concepts of thinness and fatness have ramifications for their narrative-diegetic space, the impact of the characters, and the meaning of their bodies. This dichotomy is morally loaded in a society that celebrates the thin (anorexic) aesthetic, and maligns excess in such a way that "...the size and shape of the body has come to operate as a marker of personal, internal order (or disorder) — as a symbol for the state

of the soul.”¹⁶ Thinness and fatness are contemporary expressions of historical archetypes, those expressions of the “good” and “bad” woman, the virgin (anorexia) and whore (excess), with explicit sexual associations.¹⁷ This dichotomy is exploited, within the film, with subversive intent as the fatness and substantial presence is ultimately reclaimed.

In contrast to the prominence of Kay and Sweetie’s bodies in the film, Flo is on the margins, yet there is not much physical difference in size between the three of them. Flo is Kay’s height and Sweetie’s build. What is interesting is the ease with which her body is overlooked, just as Sweetie’s size is expanded, and Kay’s reduced. That she is marginalised within the domestic drama increases the extent to which this film transgresses traditional narratives of family, and intensifies the undercurrent of tension that runs throughout the film. Despite being the mother, Flo does not hold the central unifying role familiarly associated with the maternal. This departure contradicts Flo’s reading of the safe protective (family) trees, as well as disrupting “traditional” narratives of family.

The fat body within the context of the film is expansive, overwhelming and monstrous: fat is threatening. Conversely, the thin body is insubstantial, unimposing and marginalised. Sweetie’s monstrosity and Kay’s passivity are amplified by their behaviour and clothing.¹⁸ At one level the audience are presented with two versions of a whole: the thin and the fat self, and an anorexic and outsized self. Kay and Sweetie are

¹⁶ Susan Bordo, “Reading the Slender Body”, p. 94; See also Shelley Bovey, *Being Fat*.

¹⁷ Matra Robertson, *Starving in the Silences*, develops the idea that “anorexia” is a medicalised discourse used to position self-starving women, rather than an adequate means of communicating their experience of “femininity” in contemporary Western cultures. See also Anne Summers, *Damned Whores and God’s Police*, and Jill Julius Matthews, *Good and Mad Women: the historical construction of feminism in Twentieth Century Australia* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1984).

¹⁸ See chapter four for a development of this discussion with reference to *the bone people*.

two separate responses to patriarchal society, but they are also two parts of a whole, the mirror image or inverse of each other. Anne-Marie Crawford and Adrian Martin argue that

[o]n a deeper level, the film suggests two dialectically opposed feminine archetypes — the witch-like Kay, with her secrets and superstitions, her ethereality and sublimated desires, contrasting starkly with the brute force of Sweetie's obstinate and unrelenting libido, her absolute dependence on male love.¹⁹

This dualism is compounded by Sweetie's double name. Sweetie is in fact a pet name used instead of Dawn, her given name. Thus, not only is Sweetie an excessive body, but she expands beyond a single containing name.

The actual size difference between Kay and Sweetie is not great, that of a size ten and a fourteen perhaps, but that difference is emphasised through the way their bodies are used. Kay is mostly seen wearing her bank uniform, or is dressed in very conservative clothing which emphasises her thinness and lack of substance. She is forever holding her arms and hands in front of her which actively reduces her space, as she retreats inside her own protective embrace.

Sweetie, by contrast, is open with her body and the audience see a lot more of it. Her clothing is loud and revealing, her style is somewhere between confronting and offensive, with the "Gothic" style of black clothes, dyed black hair, black painted nails and boots. The princess cuffs that she wears as an adult are a nice touch, juxtaposing Sweetie's childhood (reminiscent of the fairy throne in her bedroom and her infantilising name) and adult life.

The occupations of the two women further develop the fundamental differences

¹⁹ Anne-Marie Crawford & Adrian Martin, "SWEETIE", p. 57.

between them. Kay is a clerical officer in a bank, and Sweetie is an aspiring actor. One is protected by a counter and is restrained and controlled, whilst the other is flamboyant and “excessive” in her pursuit of an acting career. Moreover, Kay is employed while Sweetie is not.

The differences in the presentation and meanings of their bodies are also evident in a comparison of Kay and Sweetie’s nakedness. In an attempt to rejuvenate their flagging sex life, Louis makes an appointment to have sex with Kay. She, lying naked on a bed beside Louis, is obviously ill at ease with the surroundings, her body, and Louis’ expectations. Sweetie, by comparison, is comfortable and extravagant with her body, and her nakedness is not solely confined to sex.

Sweetie characteristically defies any social expectation of restraint or decorum in the presentation of her body, and visually confronts popular cinematic presentations of female nudity. The shock or discomfort of the image of Sweetie’s body comes partly from the subversion of the filmic tradition of the beautiful star and the convention that generally allows only contemporary beautiful female bodies to be visible and sexual on screen. The traditional filmic construction of woman as spectacle, where their appearance is “coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*...”,²⁰ is challenged by Campion’s presentation of the non-stereotypical female figure. Sweetie’s image has “strong visual impact”, but not in phallogentric erotic terms; in this case the nude, large body is monstrous.

As an adult, Sweetie is very different from the pale blonde child glimpsed through Gordon’s memories. As previously mentioned, she wears black clothes, has dyed black hair, black make-up and nails. It is this angry “blackness” that confronts the audience, challenging them to deconstruct the subdued images of domesticity otherwise

²⁰ Laura Mulvey, “Visual narrative pleasure and narrative cinema”, in Bill Nichols (ed), *Movies and Methods Volume Two: an anthology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), p. 309.

presented in the film. Furthermore, Sweetie is naked and smeared with black paint, making her monstrosity obvious in her final moments in the film. The use of black and white is culturally and racially loaded, and has ramifications for the representation of rebellion, especially for the white suburban child, Sweetie.

The colour black is also significant in Christian moral terms. Within such a discourse blackness is aligned with evil and sin, in opposition to the purity of white. As such the blackness of Sweetie's fashion statement becomes more than anarchy or the embodiment of anti-social politics; it is extended to a visual encoding of violence and sin. The choice of colour and clothing intensify the image of brutality and badness, and further represents Sweetie as monstrous.

Sweetie becomes the monster because she refuses to restrain or control her desire, and as such rejects the socialisation and construction of a docile subjugated body.²¹ Sweetie becomes too expansive for society, and her size is a dramatic attempt to appropriate or affirm her presence in the face of a culture that encourages the silent, withdrawn, insubstantial woman. Docility is not only the shape of compliance within the power relationship between capitalist society and individuals, but is also the shape of woman in masculinist society. She refuses to be positioned like most women whose "body language speaks eloquently though silently, of her subordinate status in a hierarchy of gender."²² Sweetie refuses constraint and expectation, through her monstrous body.

The monster, Sweetie, is made intelligible when we look at the genre of melodrama and the use of the romance discourse within the film. Sweetie's "aberrant" behaviour is amplified by the use of the melodramatic genre, with its focus on the

²¹ This refers to Foucault's theory of the "intelligible", "actual" and "subjugated" body. The "docile" body that is subjugated within a power relationship, is the result of the intelligible body (the ideal) being incorporated with the actual body.

domestic and the projection of the mundane onto the “big screen”, rendering it grotesque.

Sweetie is a melodrama, then, in so far as it focuses upon a domestic situation and the private world of family rather than the public world of business and “politics”. There is also the structural opposition that is traditional within melodrama, the individual’s struggle for self-fulfilment versus the needs and pressures of the family. Thus, in the film, Sweetie’s needs are in conflict with those of the rest of the family. The pressures upon both Kay and Sweetie, who appear to be in a traditional happy family, contradict their experiences and desires, and they express this conflict through their bodies.

The mundane is the primary setting for the film. The characters are allowed no omniscience or wider understanding of their situations; they exist within the frame of the everyday. *Sweetie* has been described as a “suburban Gothic” because of the way in which the suburbs are filled with shadows and muted horror.²³ Suburbia is writ large with everyday images juxtaposed to create a disquieting image of suburban life. The close-up of the everyday brings into focus the inadequacy and arbitrariness of any common sense notions of “normality”. Similarly, Sweetie’s inflated presence intensifies the disruption of normal everyday life. It is in the context of an overbearing normality that Sweetie’s body assumes the monstrous proportions that threaten to overwhelm the film.

The final image of Sweetie up a tree, naked and painted black, is confronting for the viewer for a number of reasons. Firstly, she looks awful, the make-up visible and “disfiguring” as opposed to the obscured and naturalised conventions of cinematic make-up. Secondly, the size and shape of Sweetie’s body, inflated by the cinema screen, is

²² Sandra Bartky, “Foucault, femininity” in Irene Diamond & Lee Quinby (eds), p. 74.

²³ Sue Gillet, “Gothic for girls” *Scarp* 21 October (1992), p. 23.

excessive.²⁴ Sweetie's impact is amplified by her size, and highlights the predominance of anorexic bodies in the film. Anorexia does have subversive potential, but within the world of cinema that potential is mediated by the construction of woman as spectacle, and the presentation of emaciated bodies are celebrated as the beauty ideal.²⁵

Issues of eating are closely associated with body size, and the act of eating is surrounded by considerable cultural regulation. As such "[c]ulture informs the individual about the 'right' food to eat and the 'correct' way in which it is to be eaten".²⁶ Certain types of food are associated with gender, morality, success and failure. Margaret Visser writes in *Much Depends on Dinner* that

[f]ood — what is chosen from the possibilities available, how it is presented, how it is eaten, with whom and when, and how much time is allotted to cooking and eating it — is one of the means by which a society creates itself and acts out its aims and fantasies.²⁷

The role of food in the film, then, amplifies the moral meanings of the bodies of Kay and Sweetie.

Although much of the film is shot in kitchens, emphasising the domestic, this film is not structured around eating or the rituals of food consumption, and most production and consumption of food is submerged in the film's construction of time and space.²⁸ When Flo prepares a meal in the outback in celebration of her family's visit the

²⁴ This is similar to Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle* where the heroines' bodies are inflated by simply being on "the big screen".

²⁵ See Susan Bordo, "The body and the reproduction of femininity" in Alison M. Jagger & Susan Bordo (eds) for a discussion of the continuum between female disorders and so-called normal practice.

²⁶ Matra Robertson, *Starving in the Silences*, p. 3.

²⁷ Margaret Visser, *Much Depends on Dinner* (London & New York: Penguin, 1989), p. 12.

²⁸ See Dorothy Jones, "The post-colonial belly laugh: appetite and its suppression" *Social Semiotic* 2:2

audience does not see the meal being eaten. The food is, nevertheless, interesting for its very absence. Set in a domestic, local, and intimate world, the film is not filled with the images of cosy domesticity most often enacted by scenes of communal feasting. The displacement or marginalisation of the ritual of eating, especially in the context of the family, intensifies the monstrosity and tension that pervades the film. The inability to share food intensifies the dysfunction of the family.

It would seem that Sweetie does eat, despite Gordon's cry of "Flo, she hasn't been eating" (p. 44). Just before the family returns to Kay's flat after journeying from the bush, Sweetie is seen sitting at the kitchen table munching on a piece of toast. She has managed to scatter rubbish throughout the entire house, including pizza boxes and other takeaway containers. We do not see her eat this food, but the inference is clear. The food is fast food, however, and this intensifies Sweetie's instability as she is seemingly unable to prepare food for herself. Sweetie feeds off the family, going so far as to eat Kay's collection of childhood china horses in a bid for attention. In doing so she consumes Kay's one remaining child-image of family. Thus Sweetie's consumption is determined by convenience and protest; she eats for a reason.

By contrast, Kay's estrangement from food is another expression of her self-denial and self control. She hardly eats throughout the film, and her relationship to food reveals the level of trauma that has been sublimated within her body. At relaxation classes she is unable to meditate successfully because of the succession of images that rush frantically through her mind. The first image is of uncooked chops, the next of an uncooked chicken, then tomatoes, followed by potatoes. This food is disturbing not so much for what it is, but for what it is not. This food is stereotypical, white Australian food but left unprocessed; it is raw and unattractive, assaulting cultural ideas determining valid consumption and taboos. Matra Robertson writes that "[d]isgust is often motivated

by fears of incorporation of an offensive object, yet this disgust is learnt.”²⁹ Instead of sumptuous images the food is revolting, and Kay is alienated from food and hunger.

The disparity between Kay and Sweetie’s food intake also intensifies Kay’s repressed enclosed sexuality, while underlining Sweetie’s excess. Eating and sex are linked within Western cultures, as is the sexual consumption of female bodies:

In the Judaeo-Christian tradition the Fruit of Knowledge was consumed before sexual activity (sin). This association of food and desire is common in various cultures. The organ which consumes food — the mouth — is an erogenous zone in Western culture, and the eroticisation of the breast in that culture has created a further link between sex and eating.³⁰

Kay’s lack of sustenance extends the repression of her body. Indeed Kay moves out of the bedroom shared with Louis to the spare room (which she later sets up as a single girl’s room) on the pretext that she has a cold. It could be argued that this illness, fabricated or not, is a physical expression of her sexuality.³¹

The furnishings in Kay’s flat underline aspects of her personality. Her flat does not have a freezer so she is unable to keep the food that Gordon brings with him, made by Flo:

“FLO:...If you want to say goodbye, you’ll have to come out...
Gordon?...Gordon, I’m going dear... the plates are cooling, all you
need to do is pop them in the freezer” (p. 24).

²⁹ Matra Robertson, *Starving in the Silences*, p. 8.

³⁰ Matra Robertson, *Starving in the Silences*, p. 3; see also Helena Michie, *The Flesh Made Word*.

³¹ The relationships between sex and food are written about by Helena Michie in *The Flesh Made Word*. Michie writes that “[t]he portrait of the appropriately sexed [Victorian] woman, then, emerges as one who eats little and delicately. She is as sickened by meat as by sexual desire”, p. 17. See also Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor* (London: Allen Lane/ Penguin Books, 1979).

The image of a woman feeding and comforting a man is clichéd and humorous, but what is not so funny is the way in which Flo's daughters are emotionally and, in the case of Kay, physically starved.

It seems that Kay is unable to receive nourishment from her mother, and the food, wrapped and labelled, is discarded. The implication is that Kay herself is the freezer, her illness manifesting into the frozen body. Her coldness is juxtaposed with Sweetie's heat; the women occupy opposite ends of the patriarchal feminine spectrum. The cold is both a symbol of so-called "frigidity" and indicative of a repressed sexual identity. Kay is unable to express her sexuality in a non-phallogentric manner.

Kay and Sweetie, then, embody the binary oppositions of patriarchal femininity. Their physical size and shape, along with their patterns of consumption and sexuality, inscribe their bodies with culturally-loaded signs that determine Sweetie's monstrosity and Kay's passivity. But these categories are disrupted by the images within the film, and monstrosity and passivity become problematic and contested spaces. This can be demonstrated by analysing the presentation of Sweetie's body, the space she takes up, and the way in which she assumes the role of the monster.

Sweetie literally crashes into the film, by breaking and entering into Kay's flat, well after the characters of Kay and Louis and their romance have been established. She smashes into Kay's home, disrupting the narrative as well as Kay's life. The timing is impeccable as Sweetie becomes the focus of anger and concern, and seems to be a physical expression of the tensions between Kay and Louis. According to Jane Campion, Sweetie represents what Kay fears: "Sweetie is what she might become if she lost control... Kay is very afraid that things will get out of control."³² Sweetie represents a physical manifestation of Kay's repressed emotions, and acts out Kay's feelings.

³² David Stratton, *The Avocado Plantation*, p. 374.

Sweetie's arrival is symbolically linked to Kay's mental state. Kay has begun dreaming of tree roots, and has entered a spiritual, non-physical phase of her relationship with Louis which allows her to retreat:

KAY: (*Brightly*) You know I think we are just having a non-sex phase, that's all.

LOUIS: Sex is something we don't need any more.

KAY: What, you think we've passed it?

LOUIS: (*Shrugs*) It's probably more spiritual like this... (p. 14)

If, as I have argued, Kay and Sweetie function as opposites then it would seem that Sweetie's blackness, her loudness, and her very presence are expressions of feelings that Kay denies or cannot express, but shares nonetheless.

It is tempting to understand Sweetie solely in the terms of her monstrosity, her outrageous physical and verbal presence. In the words of Gerard Lee, as a character Sweetie began to

...inflate, to swear, spit, bark, bite, drool and cry. And we let her have her head and do all these things until she reached the proportions of the monster who finally appears on the screen. (p. viii)

This monstrosity is conveyed through her body and her transgression of docile femininity. Sweetie's body, her material existence, is the vehicle of both her eccentric expression, as well as the discursive positioning of her aberrance as terrible.

To this extent Sweetie is awful. She is not in fact sweet at all. She is sexuality uninhibited, vulgar and imposing, keeping Kay and Louis awake one night by having energetic sex with her boyfriend Bob. She later attempts to seduce Louis on the beach while Kay is absent and while Bob is sleeping nearby. As well, in retaliation for

Gordon, Louis and Kay's plan to go on a trip without her, Sweetie pees in the gutter beside their parked car. As such she appears to be part of a long masculinist literary tradition of "anti-women", "gorgons, sirens, mothers of death, and goddesses of night [that] represent women who reject passivity and silence."³³ Myths about female gorgons and constructions of monstrosity are used to alienate women from their power and their bodies. Female bodies are often used metaphorically to indicate internal processes that are uncontained, uncontrolled and unrestrained.³⁴

Images of women as horrific and repulsive reinforce the discourse that vilifies women who transgress dominant codes of femininity. In an economy where women are valued according to their adherence to contemporary attractiveness and the resultant bodies, the monsters reveal the risk of transgression. Ironically, the monster is the form uncontained by cultural constructions of "Western" femininity:

the female monster surely sustains the alienation so many women feel from our bodies, our selves. The pruning and preening, the mirror madness, the concern with odors and aging, with hair too curly or lank, with bodies too thin or thick: all these motifs in women's lives and literature imply our dread of being identified as female monsters.³⁵

Moreover, as Barbara Creed argues, the monster offers the possibility of action and activity in contrast to the passivity embodied in the traditional patriarchal heroine.

As two examples of active monsters, there are similarities between Sweetie's

³³ Susan Gubar, "The female monster in Augustan satire" *Signs* winter 3:2 (1977), p. 393.

³⁴ Susan Bordo writes that the monstrous bodies are used "as a metaphor for anxiety about internal processes out of control — uncontained desire, unrestrained hunger, uncontrolled impulse": "Reading the slender body", p. 89.

³⁵ Susan Gubar, "The female monster in Augustan satire", p. 393.

terribleness and that of Bertha Rochester, the romantic archetypal madwoman in the attic in *Jane Eyre*.³⁶ This textual resonance underlines Sweetie's monstrosity as well as contextualising it within a literary and cultural tradition. Just as Rochester's first wife, Bertha, is imprisoned because of her vitality and sexuality, and is subsequently labelled mad and dies, so Sweetie is imprisoned by society, put on medication and, because she is still unable to be subdued (retained within the silent and passive frame of the "feminine"), she is killed. Just as Bertha functions for Jane as a "negative" image (the necessary other side) and a warning, so, too, Sweetie becomes a foil for Kay.³⁷

Sweetie's tree-house is also a version of the attic into which the madwoman is cast, and as with Bertha Rochester before her, Sweetie crashes to her death. Contrary to the obvious pun, however, Sweetie is not out of her tree; in fact she is in it. Her tree-house is her own space, larger than her body, from which she can block society out. But the boards of the house are unable to take her weight, just as society and her family are unable to carry the burden of an "aberrant" daughter. Sweetie's "abnormal" behaviour is the classic expression of a woman who is extreme, awful and, therefore, mad; madness is the space available for her non-patriarchal expression. So Sweetie is monstrous. She is suspended within the double negative of patriarchy — the female paradox: to be woman and to exist is to be too big.

Sweetie as a character, however, participates in other discourses than that of the traditional or subversive gorgon. She is the spoilt eldest child who showed theatrical promise, and she is the over-bearing, obstinate and destructive daughter who seeks to

³⁶ Charlotte Bronte, *Jane Eyre*; The expression "madwoman in the attic" is taken from Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: the woman writer and the nineteenth-century literary imagination* (New Haven & London: Yale UP, 1980).

³⁷ See Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea* (London: Penguin, 1966) for a post-colonial (re)presentation of *Jane Eyre*, specifically the character of Rochester's first wife, who becomes Antoinette Cosway a Creole heiress in Rhys's version.

drain her family of energy and compassion. Sweetie is also the child who came between her parents, causing them to separate, reuniting only on the promise of maintaining a distance from her. But most importantly the Sweetie the audience sees is a figure with power — manipulative and contradictory though it may be — the power of the female monster. Any positioning of Sweetie as a victim or madwoman, with the associated inference of passivity and powerlessness, undermines her power and assertion. Ultimately, this film is not one of victims or oppression.

There is, then, a tension running through the film. On the one hand Sweetie is not presented as simply mad. Camera angles and lighting do not construct her as a grisly fiend or gross psychopath. Yet her actions — acting like a dog and snapping, growling and barking at others, or bearing her buttocks to Gordon when he attempts to get her down from the tree-house — are not “normal”. This provides a dilemma for the audience about how to understand Sweetie. The film thus problematises both the simple correlation of family (domesticity) and the mundane with normality, and the construction of transgressive women as aberrant monstrosities without contextualising their behaviour in discourses of docility and exploitation.

A further dimension to both Sweetie’s monstrosity and Kay’s physical enclosure is their relationship with Gordon. The relationship between Gordon and Sweetie is in fact the main source of the tension that underpins the film. In the context of her relationship with Gordon, Sweetie’s awfulness takes on a wider significance, as the monstrosity of the domestic becomes the setting for her expansion. Gordon appears to be the loving and indulgent father who wants only the best for his “talented” daughter, Sweetie. He reminisces about the young Sweetie:

The windscreen dissolves into little girl’s feet in ballet shoes dancing between her father’s forearms performing a choreographed display on top of the family dining table. The show finishes with the father’s big hands holding the small feet, throwing them in the air clapping,

then catching them again. Young SWEETIE takes her bow, still standing on the table while GORDON holds her hand beside her. Young SWEETIE runs off the table flying through the air to be safely caught in balletic pose by GORDON. A small dog yaps at his feet. (p. 29)

The seemingly insignificant yapping dog, who barks at the feet of Gordon whilst he holds the young Sweetie aloft, is cast as defender rather than playmate, and is ultimately more important than its fleeting appearance would suggest.

The dining room table is a primary prop for this scene. It is a fully set table of knives, forks, and place mats, that is being danced on by a Sweetie dressed only in underpants and singlet. The table signifies the domestic and the family, the amateur (the performance at home is private), and the rituals of eating that are curiously absent in the “present” of the film. The performance, then, is contained within the home, with “daddy” as audience and participant. As such the child Sweetie is being served up for Gordon — the sweet.

Gordon’s focus upon Sweetie is part of the discourse which parodies the traditional cult of the film star, and at the same time plays upon the exploitation of the child protege. His encouragement of her talent “ [b]y geez she was a talented little thing ...sing, dance, tap, act the goat, anything she put her mind to... that kid was a natural performer”(p. 29), is at one level the encouragement of a “gifted” child by her father. Sweetie’s talent (or lack of) is secondary to the fact that Gordon was obsessed with her. Her “talent” was in existing for him. Gordon invested in her his own hopes and dreams; he too was performing, as much part of the fantasy as she was. To a certain extent, Sweetie was Gordon’s fantasy, a performing child constructed by his indulgent gaze. His memory of them practising together reveals the romanticising of that time.

Gordon’s memories of Sweetie not only mythologise and glorify her past, especially in the context of her adult failures, but also absolve him of any responsibility.

Indeed Gordon goes so far in defending Sweetie that he seems to be blaming Kay for Sweetie's problems:

I thought I brought you kids up to love each other... I can't understand what's happening. The whole family's coming apart like a wet paper bag. Am I the only one who believes in it anymore?... People like you two don't appreciate this, but the show world is full of unusual types... You've never appreciated her, Kay.... (pp. 28–29)

There is a fine line, however, between Gordon's encouragement of Sweetie and concern for her welfare, and his obsession with her.

It is obvious throughout the film that, at the very least, Gordon is engrossed by the child Sweetie. The juxtaposition of images of the golden-haired compliant child with the blackened soiled adult raises questions about how or why this transition occurred. In "Gothic for girls" Sue Gillet argues that the subtext of the film, the unspoken horror, is incest.³⁸ Crawford and Martin also make reference to "a suggested father-daughter incest dependency".³⁹ Thus, Sweetie's excess can be understood to be an attempt to become too expansive for her father's attentions, that is, a physical embodiment of a history of abuse. Similarly, Kay's behaviour as the inverse of Sweetie's, is illuminated by at least a knowledge of incest.

For most of the film incest operates as a discomfiting undertone. There is one scene, however, where the discomfort of the screen image and Kay's response disrupt the silence that surrounds incest. Kay heads into the kitchen for a glass of water, on her way passing the bathroom. She looks through the partly open door to see Sweetie

³⁸ Sue Gillet, "Gothic for girls", p. 23.

³⁹ Anne-Marie Crawford & Adrain Martin, "SWEETIE", p. 57.

kneeling beside the bath soaping Gordon, who is in the water. They are playing a game: Sweetie keeps dropping the soap and having to fish round in the bath to retrieve it. As the screenplay expounds,

the real point of the exercise is not this [washing Gordon] but dropping the soap and having to find it amongst DAD's limbs. KAY watches with awe as SWEETIE's hand plunges down into the milky water. She can't see the look on her father's face but the back of his head is very still, unnaturally so. (p. 33)

Gordon's stillness and Sweetie's action is at the very least unsettling for the audience. Certainly Kay is distressed by what she sees, and she retreats to her bed:

KAY gets into bed not quite sure if she's seen what she has seen. She lies straight, the sheets held primly up to her chin. The remains of her china horse collection maimed, legless, headless, lie shining in a little box by the bed. (p. 33)

This retreat, hiding her body and freezing into motionlessness, enacts both a physical response to incest, and an embodiment of social responses to incest: retreat and silence.

Kay's dreams of phallic seedlings and strangulating tree roots, read in conjunction with the bath scene, underscore the presence of incest. The images of a patriarchal "traditional" family are discomforting because of the undercurrent of manipulation, deceit and oppression. Nevertheless, this is not a film about the perpetration of father-daughter abuse, although such abuse is part of the family's history. A victim narrative is avoided in the film. Gordon is not a powerful or abusive character, and his body has withered and reduced in comparison with Sweetie. In the bath scene it is Sweetie who is active, playing the game; Gordon is motionless.

Sweetie's response to abandonment when the others go in search of Flo is to assume the personae of a dog. When they return home they are confronted by Sweetie

sitting at the kitchen table with her T-shirt pulled up over her head:

(FLO goes towards her. SWEETIE lets out a low dog growl. FLO stops short.)

GORDON: Sweetie, we've been looking forward to seeing you.
(SWEETIE continues to growl and bare her teeth ...)

KAY: *(Looking around the house)* Well it's not too bad *(Looking at the house)*.

(She sees SWEETIE's dog act and stops.)

What's she doing? Dawn what is it?

(SWEETIE is putting the dog act into second gear, it all seems to be going rather well.)

Stop it Dawn. Stop it now.

GORDON: Shhh Kay. Hello little puppy. Will you show Daddy what you know? Come on now.

KAY: I can't believe this.

(GORDON puts his hand out. At first it appears she's going to shake it. GORDON moves forward confidently. But when he gets close she growls and snaps. GORDON steps back. SWEETIE laughs.)
 (pp. 44-45)

This adoption of an animal persona heightens her monstrosity, similar to Bertha Rochester, who in *Jane Eyre* is depicted as animalistic and ferocious. But it also represents her embodiment of a protective energy, as she becomes a dog that attempts to

defend herself from Gordon's exploitation. Furthermore, as Sweetie expands from her petite childhood figure to her adulthood mass (in an apparent attempt to retain the limelight and the centre stage which fostered her individualism and legitimised her difference), Gordon seems to have diminished. He once had big hands that held the young Sweetie aloft, but now is reduced to reaching out ineffectually to pat her when she acts like a puppy.

The Sweetie that consumes the film, however, is almost a parody of the sweet young thing that Gordon prepared for stardom. Just as her double-barrelled name suggests dichotomies, polarities and schizophrenia (women's madness), it also provides space for expansion and subversion of those constructs. Sweetie absorbs the diegetic space, and fills it with herself. Just as within the family she feeds off their love and guilt, within the narrative action she feeds off the space and place of others. This is demonstrated by her invasion of Kay's house, and her malicious act of "eating" Kay's china horses.

The discourse of incest does much to explain Sweetie's extraordinary behaviour, and is itself the real monstrosity at the centre of the film. Together with the ironic use of melodrama and mundane domesticity, the inference of incest problematises the association of fatness and madness that positions Sweetie as awful. But Sweetie is not a victim, her body beyond containment seemingly at the same time as Gordon is diminished by age. Any physical inequality located in the body of the man and the child has been reversed. Sweetie's ambiguous and complex character remains too much for any reductive explanation.

The end of the film seems to present the audience with the necessary death and recuperation of the disruptive woman, with Sweetie's refusal of docility undercut by her death, and the patriarchal and victim narratives predominating. But the film is ultimately more complex. At the moment of Sweetie's death the audience is caught in the uncomfortable grip of a conservative popular romance; Kay is freed from her mad sister,

is able to regain her composure, and re-establish her relationship with Louis. Rather than affirming the reincorporation of the fat woman within the containing narratives of docility, however, it is Kay's very appropriation of Sweetie that allows Kay personal growth and freedom, and enables her to investigate non-phallogentric sexuality. Thus at the end of the film Kay initiates renewed sexual contact with Louis through her feet:

KAY and LOUIS are in the main bedroom. KAY's single bed has been moved back and placed a foot or so from the double bed. She is lying on it alone. LOUIS is on the double bed. KAY moves her foot across and touches LOUIS's foot.

KAY: Do you know what your feet do when you have sex?

LOUIS: What?

(KAY pulls her pantyhose down and off. She starts wiggling her toes, curling them under, stretching them out, then curling them under again.)

LOUIS: Yeah...?

(LOUIS does it to his own feet. He cannot believe it. The dapples from the street tree play across their bare legs.) (p. 63)

Similarly, when Kay gives Sweetie mouth-to-mouth resuscitation after she has fallen from the tree-house, it is a symbolic "consume-ation" of Sweetie as much as an offering of her own air. The mingling of breath and blood joins them together:

KAY: Oh Jesus...

(On impulse she rushes forward and flattening SWEETIE out tries to do what she can remember of first-aid mouth-to-mouth. She works

nervously fast, she cannot remember how many breaths.)

KAY: Sweetie, come on... How many breaths?

(She stops breathing into her mouth as another big gollop of blood comes up.)

KAY: Oh God... Call someone!

(Neither FLO nor GORDON seem able to move. KAY keeps working with breathing and pressure on her chest. This sends more blood out of her mouth.)

KAY: Sweetie, come on, breathe! (p. 59)

Despite Kay's frantic efforts Sweetie does not breathe, and the audience is left with a grief-stricken Kay, whose blood-stained mouth is the imprint of Sweetie's. One cannot avoid the association of the mouth and the vagina, with the associations of speech and sexuality, two openings that allow for desire fulfilment. Implicit within this image is an allusion to vampirism and lesbianism. The blood also signifies menstruation and a possibility of a renewal of life; Sweetie into Kay. It is in this way that the sisters infuse each other and rescue Sweetie's death from the trope of female victimisation.

Kay breathes in and eats Sweetie, gaining nourishment and fulfilment, and thereby substance. The cannibalism parodies the way in which women are often portrayed as edible, and available for male consumption within hetero-sexist society.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ This can be compared to Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman*, and the way in which Marian literalises her consumption by society through the baking and eating of a cake in the shape of a woman. See chapter three.

At the same time it demonstrates the way in which women can feed off each other, gaining substance otherwise denied to them. Kay consumes Sweetie, rather than losing her, and thereby gains a substance and a presence leading to a more grounded “down-to-earth” sexuality, constructed on her own terms. Sweetie remains transgressive even in death.

Sweetie disturbs the pleasant, comfortable, reading/viewing position of the audience through her body. She is subversive within the only patriarchal position available to her: that of monstrosity. Her violence is an expression and demonstration of the violence enacted upon her both through the intimate patriarch and the overarching patriarchal structure of society. The final union between Sweetie and Kay, however, is even more terrible, even more threatening to any patriarchal world, as Kay is able to realise her strength and substance and become active. The death of the monster is subverted.

The complexities of *Sweetie* are therefore illuminated by focusing on the body as the site of discursive analysis. A dualist construction of women into categories of good/bad, thin/fat, virgin/whore, demure/gross, or goddess/monster is problematised by the film, and by the bodies of both Sweetie and Kay, who move beyond containing categorisation. Kay and Sweetie are all those things: thin, fat, sexual, demure and monstrous.

The fat woman who consumes this film is not lost within the narrative of madness or monstrosity. Sweetie’s monstrosity is contextualised and becomes the embodiment of the horror of the domestic. But Sweetie continues to expand, remaining until the end a disruptive, problematic fat woman.

Chapter Three

“the body of a goddess”: disintegration, aging and pregnancy in *Lady Oracle* and *The Edible Woman*

In the 1990s it is virtually impossible to look at Canadian writing without talking about Margaret Atwood. Atwood started writing in 1956¹ and has become

the most written-about Canadian writer ever, and there is an enormous amount of academic criticism on her work produced not only in North America but also in Britain, and increasingly in Europe, Australia and India.²

The critical response to the two Atwood novels used in this study, *The Edible Woman* (1969), and *Lady Oracle* (1976), is no exception. Almost all aspects of the novels have been written about, from the use of mirrors, to the role of clothing in characterisation.

Both *Lady Oracle* and *The Edible Woman* are concerned with the body and with eating. *The Edible Woman* is about a dissatisfied market researcher, Marian MacAlpin, who responds to social pressures by becoming anorexic. *Lady Oracle*, by contrast, has as its central character a woman who was obese as a child, and is svelte as an adult. Molly Hite writes of *Lady Oracle* that

this is a book in which fat is a feminist issue, and in which excess of body becomes symbolic of female resistance to a society that wishes to constrict women to dimensions it deems appropriate using devices that range from exemplars to definitions to diets.³

¹ Jo Brans, “Using what you’re given” in Earl G. Ingersoll (ed), *Margaret Atwood: conversations* (London: Virago Press, 1992), p. 140.

² Coral Ann Howells, *Margaret Atwood* (Basingstoke, Hampshire & London: MacMillan, 1996), p. 6.

³ Molly Hite, *The Other Side of the Story: structures and strategies of contemporary feminist narrative*

She goes on to argue that “the female body, as a figure for female desire, becomes both spectacular and invisible within a culture wishing to restrict the “real” to masculinist desire and its objects”.⁴ I want to take up this idea of the fat body and its political and social implications in both *Lady Oracle* and *The Edible Woman*, as well as broaden the definition of fatness to include other bodies, namely pregnant and mature-age bodies.

The two women, Marian and Joan, experience crises at the level of body, disintegrating and disappearing in various proportions. J. Brooks Bouson writes that

Marian MacAlpin suffers from a deficient sense of self. Fearing that her “core” identity is threatened by the female roles she is expected to assume — those of wife and mother — she experiences recurrent, and increasingly frightening episodes of disintegration anxiety.⁵

Similarly, Celia Mitchell argues that Joan disintegrates, and that “Atwood is making an effective statement regarding the tendency for human beings to disintegrate, to split apart, under the pressures of modern living”.⁶ One of the major pressures of modern living for women, as outlined in chapter one, is the high degree of discipline that it takes to produce a body that speaks of the cultural shape of the feminine, and one of the themes central to both texts is the tension both women experience surrounding social expectations, their own bodies and fat bodies that expand beyond the parameters of the feminine.

Marian and Joan’s disintegration and disappearance mimic that of mature-aged and pregnant women who exist within the novels as other fat bodies.⁷ Atwood states:

(New York: Cornell UP, 1989), pp. 131–32.

⁴ Molly Hite, *The Other Side of the Story*, p. 141.

⁵ J. Brooks Bouson, “The anxiety of being influenced: reading and responding to character in Margaret Atwood’s *The Edible Woman*” *Style* 24:2 Summer (1990), p. 231.

⁶ Celia Mitchell, “The external world in the novels of Margaret Atwood” *Journal of Canadian Studies* 15:1 (1988), p. 52.

⁷ See John Thieme, “A female Houdini: popular culture in Margaret Atwood’s *Lady Oracle*” *Kunapipi* 14:1 (1992), pp. 71–80, for a discussion of the way Joan escapes the plots of the Gothic romances

[t]he body as a concept has always been a concern of mine... I think that people very much experience themselves through their bodies and through concepts of the body which get applied to their bodies. Which they pick up from their culture and apply to their own bodies. It's also my concern in *Lady Oracle* and it's even there in *The Edible Woman*.⁸

It is the relationship between the two central characters, with the shape-shifting, expansive bodies of pregnant and mature-aged women, that is the subject of this chapter.

Mature-age and pregnant female bodies are subject to a high level of social comment and intervention, especially in societies that celebrate the slim, youthful body. They are perceived as being "let go", "falling apart", and expanding beyond control, and as such they are sites of cultural anxiety. Aging, for example, is "a cultural as well as physical phenomenon", and has meanings far beyond any "biological" process.⁹ Female aging is fraught with contradiction. Dominant discourses normalise women as not only white and middle-class but also as youthful. If dominant images of female aging are to be believed, age brings madness, ugliness and misery; moreover, "old women" receive little sympathy or respect.¹⁰ With aging populations, older women are the target of medical

through her disappearance.

⁸ Elizabeth Meese, "The empress has no clothes" in Earl G. Ingersoll (ed) *Margaret Atwood: conversations*, p. 187.

⁹ Paul Carter, "Ageless light: a tubercular history" *Australian Cultural History: ageing* 14 (1995), p. 145; see also Dr Mark Novak *Successful Aging: the myths, realities and future of aging in Canada* (Markham, Ontario: Penguin Canada, 1985).

¹⁰ According to Jill Julius Matthews, "[w]ithin the Australian gender order the notion of an old woman is a derogatory one", *Good and Mad Women*, p. 195; see also Gale Rubin, "The traffic in women: notes on the 'political economy of sex'" in Karen V. Hansen & Ilene J. Philipson (eds), *Women, Class and the Feminist Imagination: a socialist-feminist reader* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1990); Kathryn Pauly Morgan, "Women and the knife: cosmetic surgery and the colonization of women's bodies" *Hypatia* 6:3 Fall (1991), pp. 25–53; Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth*; Annette Corrigan, "Fashion, beauty and feminism".

and cosmetic industries which exploit the negative, gender-specific aspects of growing old. The availability of anti-aging or “age-defying” make-up, plastic surgery and hormone replacement therapy is testimony to social anxiety over female aging.

Barbara Kamler and Susan Feldman in “Mirror Mirror on the Wall: reflections on ageing” write about how growing old is constructed and the ways women negotiate these narratives:

Ageing is an embodied experience, yet we do not often speak of the body except in terms of decline, pain and deterioration; machine metaphors predominate, detailing a process of running out of steam, of frail body parts wearing out before their use by date. Because women have been culturally defined and valued in terms of their appearance, the visible outward signs associated with aging are problematic to their sense of identity and valuing.¹¹

Aging, then, is often associated with fatness, through the slippage between old age and the “unattractive body” — the older body expands beyond the confines of the youthful attractive figure. Sandra Bartky writes, “[t]he very contours a woman’s body takes on as she matures — the fuller breasts and rounded hips — have become distasteful.”¹²

The cold, older woman whose character emanates death, decay or the constricting weight of moralism is a familiar stereotype in film and novels. According to Margaret Atwood herself, within Canadian literature “there is a bumper crop of sinister Hecate-Crones”, older women who represent the misery of aging.¹³ These women are positioned within a specific ageist and gendered discourse that understands older women

¹¹ Barbara Kamler & Susan Feldman, “Mirror Mirror on the wall: reflections on ageing” *Australian Cultural History: ageing* 14 (1995), pp. 7–8.

¹² Sandra Bartky “Foucault, femininity” in Irene Diamond & Lee Quinby (eds), p. 73.

¹³ Margaret Atwood, *Survival: a thematic guide to Canadian literature* (Toronto: Anansi, 1972), p. 199; for examples of Hecate figures see Margaret Laurence, *The Stone Angel* (Toronto: Seal Books, 1980) and Joan Barfoot, *Duet For Three* (London: Women's Press, 1985).

as embodying mortality, whereas older men attain immortality through patrilineal inheritance, public life and “success”. Through the process of aging the female body reminds society of human mortality, particularly through its association with reproduction.¹⁴ Menopause, too, has long been a site of cultural crisis as this quote from the 1920s demonstrates:

When a woman at age forty-eight shows signs of alcoholic intemperance, a craving for drugs, or becomes “converted” to a new religious creed, begins to exhibit an indifference to her husband and children, neglects the home, develops a passionate zeal for the emancipation of her sex, or falls ardently in love with a youth... these... are ascribed “the change of life.”¹⁵

The “change of life” is a potentially disruptive time as the woman moves beyond definitions that revolve around maternity. The mature-age woman is thus ambiguous and threatening.

Pregnancy too is a site of cultural anxiety. The process of child-bearing makes a woman fat in the sense that there is an “uncontrollable” expansion of the body. There is also the associated discourse of invasion, and cultural fear of the occupation of one body by another.¹⁶ Like aging, pregnancy is a cultural experience as much as a physical one, and the pregnant body is a resonant cultural figure evoking images from religious purity

¹⁴ See Katherine Gilday, *The Famine Within*.

¹⁵ Dr Walter Gallichan writing in 1920 cited in Lois W. Banner, *In Full Flower: aging women, power, and sexuality* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), p. 293; see also Sandra Coney, *The Menopause Industry: a guide to medicine's “discovery” of the mid-life woman* (Auckland: Penguin, 1991).

¹⁶ For an example of the fear associated with the process of pregnancy see the film *Alien 3*. Bodily invasion is a common theme of mainstream science fiction, and as discussed in chapters one and two, is one of the monstrous images of women analysed by Barbara Creed. At a philosophical level, this alien invasion disrupts the attempt to maintain a unified subject position.

to perilous entrapment.¹⁷ Cultural anxiety is often expressed through a concern to contain pregnancy within appropriate sites, and limit the expansion of the body.¹⁸

Once the child has been born, however, the focus becomes the “regaining of ones figure”, and women’s magazines feature many articles on how to remove the traces of fat that are testament to pregnant expansion.¹⁹ Despite the diets and exercise routines that are designed to tighten, firm and flatten there is a counter-veiling view that the body never quite regains its previous shape, always carrying the knowledge of pregnancy within its frame.

It is possible to expand the dimensions of female fatness, and reveal the extent to which various female forms are sites of cultural anxiety by looking at the mature-age, pregnant and fat bodies within *The Edible Woman* and *Lady Oracle*. A focus on the relationships of the central characters to the “marginalised” fat bodies in the texts makes it possible to see the connections between types of female shapes. Joan and Marian disintegrate in the same ways that they understand older, pregnant and fat women do, and thus demonstrate the limitations of cultural discourses of aging, pregnancy, and the attractive, slim, female form. I explore the issues of aging, pregnancy, and fatness, firstly in *The Edible Woman*, and secondly in *Lady Oracle*.

¹⁷ Pregnancy has different meanings according to race, ethnicity, class and religion. Concern about birth rates at the turn of the century in Australia, for example, was confined to the production of “white” babies. Aboriginal women were not encouraged to reproduce. Continuing social tensions over the use of contraception also reveal the way in which pregnancy is a political and cultural issue; See Gill Bottomley, Maire de Lepervanche & Jeanie Martin (eds), *Intersexions*.

¹⁸ Pregnancy is also the site of medical and surgical intervention, with the body understood to require medical management. Similarly, many scientific resources are directed towards repositioning conception outside the female body.

¹⁹ For examples of magazine features about women and the post-natal body see “I did it for Antonio” *The Australian Women’s Weekly* August (1997), pp. 10–13 where Melanie Griffith talks about her exercise and diet regimen and plastic surgery in the weeks after the birth of her third child, and “I’ll keep on looking as sexy as ever” *New Idea* August 9 (1997), pp. 6–7 about Heather Locklear (seven months pregnant at the time of publication) and her “5-day fat-to-muscle-eating plan”. Locklear is quoted as saying, “I’m already planning an eating and workout routine to help me get back in shape quickly after my baby is born”, p. 6.

Marian MacAlpin in *The Edible Woman* is a bored market researcher, who falls apart. Seeking release from the dead-end career for the single woman, or the piecemeal work for the married or mature-aged woman, Marian accepts her boyfriend Peter's marriage proposal, despite her apprehension. But her discomfort is not so easily subdued, and it catapults her into a spiral of lessening "control". The narrative moves from the first person to the third, signifying her alienation from self. Gradually Marian becomes increasingly unable to eat, not through any conscious choice but through her body's actions. Beginning with the odd morsel, her "passive anorexia" assumes greater and greater proportions, paralleling her disempowerment. Marian is, however, able to resume eating once she faces her fears and problems, the text turning on her movement from passivity to action. Her grand gesture, at the end of the novel, is to bake a cake in the image of a woman, an edible woman, to be offered up for consumption in her place.²⁰

Marian is threatened by mature-age, menopausal, mid-life women. Mature-age women crowd her at Seymour Surveys market research company where she works. She is "suffocated by this thick sargasso-sea of femininity"²¹ (p. 167 *ew*). These women also represent her future, a dead-end job as a "spinster", menial work as the "older woman", or volunteer work as a "house-wife". Marian identifies fat with the process of aging and, not unsurprisingly, with social and political powerlessness, because "for Western women the gaining of weight has come to mean the loss of power."²² At the office Christmas party Marian postulates, "You were green and then you ripened: became mature. Dresses for the mature figure. In other words, fat" (p. 166 *ew*). Although not all mature-age

²⁰ Emma Parker writes of Atwood's texts more generally, "by demonstrating how consumption is related to power, Atwood subtly urges women to empower themselves by urging them to eat their way into the world": "You Are What You Eat: the politics of eating in the novels of Margaret Atwood" *Twentieth Century Literature* 41:3 Fall 1995, pp. 349–68.

²¹ Margaret Atwood, *The Edible Woman* (London: Virago, 1990). All future references will be cited parenthetically in the text along with the letters "ew".

²² Mary Condé, "Fat Ladies and Food" (University of London: Unpublished paper), p. 1.

women are *fat* (in a physical sense), Marian clearly associates aging with the process of weight gain.

At the office Marian slips between the “office virgins” and the mature-age women. As a soon-to-be-married young woman, her days are numbered as,

Mrs Brogue [the boss] preferred her girls to be either unmarried or seasoned veterans with their liability to unpredictable pregnancies well in the past. Newly-weds, she had been heard to say, were inclined to be unstable. (p. 168 *ew*)

Marian’s life within 1960s Canadian society is thus mapped out according to the size and shape of her body; slender virginity, susceptibility to pregnancy, and fat maturity. Accordingly, the shape of her body determines her place within society, and her fear of fat is telling.

At the office Christmas party, Marian surveys the women’s bodies critically, as though she had never seen them before... now she could see the roll of fat pushed up across Mrs. Gundridge’s back by the top of her corset, the ham-like bulge of thigh, the creases round the neck, the large porous cheeks; the blotch of varicose veins glimpsed at the back of one plump crossed leg, the way her jowls jellied when she chewed, her sweater a woolly teacosy over those rounded shoulders; and the others too, similar in structure but with varying proportions and textures of bumpy permanents and dune-like contours of breast and waist and hip.... (p. 167 *ew*)

At the same time, however, Marian recognises her affinity with the office women: “she was one of them, her body the same, identical, merged with that other flesh that choked the air in the flowered room with its sweet organic scent...” (p. 167 *ew*). This ambivalence is central to Marian’s disintegration.

The mature-age body is expansive and transgressive as it develops beyond the restraints of the contemporary attractive (implicitly youthful) female body through the “dune-like contours of breast and waist and hip”. Revealed through the material in folds, lumps and curves is that most threatening attribute *female fat*.²³ This fatness is a social indicator of failure and redundancy, and is what Marian reacts against. Large women who take up space and challenge the construction of femininity as an embodiment of passivity and victimisation, are recuperated (negatively) within patriarchal confines. Just as Helena Rubinstein maintains that, “[t]here are no ugly women... only lazy ones,” so it can be said, there are no fat or old women, only lazy ones.²⁴

Marian’s unease about the (paid) work place and associated life-style surfaces in response to the office pension plan. Here Marian’s unease about aging and an unpromising career collide; “Isn’t it too soon for me to join the Pension Plan? I mean — don’t you think I’m too young?” (p. 20 *ew*). The pension plan is, however, “obligatory”, and Marian has no choice but to sign;

A pension. I foresaw a bleak room with a plug-in electric heater. Perhaps I would have a hearing aid, like one of my great-aunts who had never married. I would talk to myself; children would throw snowballs at me. I told myself not to be silly, the world would probably blow up between now and then.... (p. 21 *ew*)

It is soon after signing away her life that she becomes engaged to her boyfriend Peter, thus taking the only available escape route, marriage. The avenue of marriage, the socially-prescribed option, nonetheless is problematic as Joe, the husband of Marian’s friend Clara, expounds. He remarks, somewhat ironically:

when she gets married, her core gets invaded... The centre of her personality, the thing she’s built up; her image of herself, if you

²³ Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth*.

²⁴ Helena Rubinstein in Sandra Bartky, *Femininity and Domination: studies in the phenomenology of oppression* (New York & London: Routledge, 1990), p. 40.

like... Her feminine role and her core are really in opposition, her feminine role demands passivity from her... So she allows her core to get taken over by the husband. And when the kids come, she wakes up one morning and discovers she doesn't have anything left inside, she's hollow, she doesn't know who she is any more; her core has been destroyed. (pp. 235–36 *ew*)

Joe's speech is problematised by his complicity in the invasion of Clara's life as her husband, and the father of their children. As such, it is Joe's "explanation" of his wife's passivity, rather than necessarily being the experience of all married women. It is a timely warning, however, in the context of Marian's forthcoming marriage to Peter.

Marian's disintegration accelerates after her engagement. She is increasingly unable to eat certain foods until she can consume nothing, as she progressively loses "control" over her body, and, by extension, her autonomy. She finds herself talking to Peter about their wedding plans in a "soft flannelly voice I barely recognised", saying:

..."I'd rather have you decide that. I'd rather leave the big decisions up to you." I was astounded at myself. I'd never said anything remotely like that to him before. The funny thing was I really meant it. (p. 90 *ew*)

As well as losing herself in Peter's gaze — looking at him she sees herself as "small and oval, mirrored in his eyes" (p. 83 *ew*) — Marian loses herself within her body, becoming a passive anorexic, victimised by her self.²⁵

Coral Ann Howells argues that

[t]hough Marian suffers from the visual and cognitive distortions which characterise semi-starvation, most of the usual symptoms of anorexia are absent. She has no phobic fear of fat and she suffers no weight loss; she does not feel any of that enhanced

²⁵ See Matra Robertson, *Starving in the Silences*, for a discussion of self-starving as opposed to the discourse of anorexia.

sense of autonomy which Shelia MacLeod describes in *The Art of Starvation* (1982). Marian suffers from a condition of self-division which Dennis Cooley has identified in *Power Politics*...²⁶

This argument has considerable merit. A reliance on a clinical definition of anorexia, however, does not do justice to the degrees of so-called disordered eating patterns commonly practised by women who do not fall into the category of medically-defined anorexia.²⁷ Furthermore, Marian displays considerable discomfort with the fat bodies of pregnant and mature-age women, which it could be argued is a projection of her own difficulties with fat on to other bodies.

The presentation of “disordered” eating in *The Edible Woman* is comical and ironic in its satirising of the culture of dieting and anorexia. The further Marian progresses towards matrimony, the less “control” she has over her eating, and paradoxically the greater her fear of expansion. Moreover, Marian’s fear “of losing her shape, spreading out, not being able to contain herself any longer...” (p. 219 *ew*), is reminiscent of descriptions of the “older” women. The more she becomes distanced from her body, the more she is afraid “that she [is] dissolving, coming apart layer by layer like a piece of cardboard in a gutter puddle” (p. 218 *ew*). Although paradoxical, this is precisely the narrative of aging. That is, the mature-age woman is deemed to be disintegrating through the “natural” process of decay, and the simultaneously expanding, growing fat. Thus the gaining of weight is identified with maturity (or the process of aging), and is conflated with the fear of dissolving. This fear, then, speaks of Marian’s

²⁶ Coral Ann Howells, *Margaret Atwood*, pp. 46–47. Marian’s eating’s patterns have been the subject of much comment. For example, see Tracy Brian, “Figuring Anorexia: Margaret Atwood’s *The Edible Woman*” *Literature, Interpretation, Theory* 6:3/4 (1995), pp. 299–311; Mary Jean Green, “Margaret Atwood and the Making of Critical History” *Essays on Canadian Writing* 41(1990), pp. 116–20; David L. Harkness, “Alice in Toronto: the carrollian intertext in *The Edible Woman*” *Essays on Canadian Writing* 37 Spring (1989), pp. 103–11.

²⁷ See Matra Robertson, *Starving in the Silences*, for an analysis of the way medical discourses define and limit types of non-eating.

inability to stay within the confines of slim-line (youthful) femininity. The process of diminishing control over her body catapults her into the very passive and fragmented femininity that she was seeking to evade.

In the bath Marian's body extends "in a series of curves and hollows down towards the terminal peninsula of legs and the reefs of toes..." (p. 218 *ew*). Her body is described as landscape suggestive of colonisation, and is a precursor to Joan's body of "disputed territory" in *Lady Oracle*, with connotations of colonised exploitation and consumption.²⁸ Marian is shocked by, and distanced from, the image of herself in the bath taps which reflect three "bulging and distorted forms, her own waterlogged body" (p. 218 *ew*). Barbara Kamler and Susan Feldman argue that "[w]hen the body is surveyed in the mirror it is stationary; it becomes an object of scrutiny, subject to the cultural gaze". The distorted image Marian sees both undermines the insight that the mirror offers (the ability to see the self), and simultaneously reveals her transgression of the patriarchal-feminine.²⁹ Nora Foster Stovel argues that *The Edible Woman*

introduces the theme of identity and the motif of the mirror — that traditional emblem of female vanity — to symbolize, in a comparatively obvious and highly humorous manner, the distorted self-image which the heroine ultimately exorcizes.³⁰

Marian is not only expanding, she is multiplying.

This disintegration is experienced as the separation of mind and body, and recalls the philosophical tradition of the body-soul split, psychological disorders, and patriarchal

²⁸ Margaret Atwood, *Lady Oracle* (London: Virago, 1992), p. 69. All future references will be cited parenthetically in the text along with the letters "lo".

²⁹ Barbara Kamler & Susan Feldman, "Mirror Mirror on the wall", p. 13.

³⁰ Nora Foster Stovel, "Reflections on Mirror Images: doubles and identity in the novels of Margaret Atwood" *Essays on Canadian Writing*, 33 Fall (1986), pp. 50–51. See also Elizabeth Grosz, *Jacques Lacan: a feminist introduction* (London & New York: Routledge, 1990), and *Sexual Subversions: three French feminists* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1989) for a psychoanalytic theorising of mirrors, reflections, the patriarchal gaze and their relationship to objectification and subjectivity.

fragmentation of women. Marian's fragmentation, however, is presented comically as she is alienated from (her)self, through her body's "mindless" rejection of food:

She had tried to reason with it, had accused it of having frivolous whims, had coaxed it and tempted it, but it was adamant; and if she used force it rebelled. (p.177 *ew*)

Marian experiences her passive anorexia and her problem with social institutions (paid work and marriage) as a form of madness, a loss of control, and disintegration.

Both Marian's lover, Duncan, and fiancé, Peter, celebrate her insubstantial body. Duncan, says of her,

all I can think of is those layers and layers of woolly clothes you wear, coats and sweaters and so on. Sometimes I wonder whether it goes on and on, maybe you're woollen all the way through... (p. 202 *ew*)

He makes a sexual advance only when Marian is wearing his dressing gown, suggesting a masculinist narcissism.³¹ Marian,

was not sure what was happening: there was an uneasy suspicion in one corner of her mind that what he was really caressing was his own dressing-gown, and that she merely happened to be inside it. (p. 144 *ew*)

Peter, too, likes Marian soft and empty, easily assuming control over her. Even before their engagement Marian feels that Peter, "was treating [her] as a stage-prop; silent but solid, a two-dimensional outline" (p. 71 *ew*). Significantly, Peter is delighted with Marian's appearance when she "dresses up" for their engagement party. Marian has had

³¹ It has been argued that Duncan is Marian's twin, mirroring her desires and inadequacies. This reading, however, undermines the extent to which Duncan seeks a companion who reflects himself, and the fashion which celebrates the adolescent male look in women's bodies. See Ildiko De Papp Carrington, "'I'm stuck': the secret sharers in *The Edible Woman*" *Essays on Canadian Writing* 23 Spring (1982), pp. 68–87, and Coral Ann Howells, *Margaret Atwood*; see also chapter four for a discussion on androgyny.

her hair set, enduring the hairdressers who “treated your head like a cake” (p. 208 *ew*). Her make-up has been done by her flatmate Ainsley, and she is wearing a “short, red, and sequined” dress (p. 208 *ew*). Coiffured and dressed, Marian is ready to be unwrapped and eaten, the very image of contained, patriarchally-determined, docile femininity.

The engagement party marks the climactic point of crisis for Marian, where she dons the body of the contemporary slim-line youthful woman, but recognises her inability to sustain the concealing image. When Marian tries to look at herself in the mirror just prior to the party she is unable to see her whole body:

She was only able to see one thing at a time. What was it that lay beneath the surface these pieces were floating on, holding them all together? She held both of her naked arms out towards the mirror. They were the only portion of her flesh that was without a cloth or nylon or leather or varnish covering, but in the glass even they looked fake, like soft pinkish-white rubber or plastic, boneless, flexible.... (p. 229 *ew*)

She is further distanced from her body by the layers of feminine clothing and apparel that define the female subject.³² Marian is extremely uncomfortable with this image, and, finally, flees the engagement party after Peter tries to capture (and fix) her image on film.

Marian runs from the party to find her lover, Duncan, certain that he will “know what to do” (p. 244 *ew*). Duncan, who had been invited to the party and had himself fled before crossing the threshold of the apartment, is upset by his inability to recognise Marian, who is dressed for Peter: “you didn’t tell me it was a masquerade... Who the hell are you meant to be?” (p. 239 *ew*). Marian locates Duncan at the local laundromat, and finds herself committed to a course of action that involves finding a sleazy hotel and spending the night with her lover.

³² See Annette Corrigan, “Fashion, beauty and feminism” for a discussion of the links between femininity and fashion.

But Duncan is unable to make love with Marian because she has too much flesh:

I feel like some kind of little stunted creature crawling over the surface of a huge mass of flesh. Not that you're fat... you aren't. There's just altogether too much flesh around here. It's suffocating. (p. 253 *ew*)

Ironically, this suffocation is similar to that which Marian felt at the Christmas party. Duncan's response to Marian's body when they attempt to have sex reinforces Marian's link with the "older women" through body fat.

Even the girdle Marian bought in anticipation of her engagement party ironically suggests "older" women. Marian's decision to purchase the form-fitting red dress for the party had prompted the sales assistant's intervention:

Of course you're very *thin* dear, you don't really need one, but still that *is* a close-fitting dress and you wouldn't want it to be obvious that you haven't got one on, would you? (p. 221 *ew*)

The girdle is mobilised to conceal Marian's body, and as such her sexuality is supposedly safely contained within the girdle, while at the same time being defined by it.³³ Implicit within the attempt to conceal and shape Marian's body is the knowledge of aging and expansion. The body that shadows Marian's slim, confined body is the mature-age body, and the process of aging distorts the sexualisation of the girdle, as it no longer contains sexuality but rolls of fat. The girdle becomes the corset.³⁴

³³ Celia G. Mitchell writes that "[i]n all her novels Atwood uses such externalities as clothing and appearance to define characters who in many cases are underdeveloped psychologically, functioning only in ways which expand the themes of her novels": "The External World in the Novels of Margaret Atwood" *Journal of Canadian Studies* 15:1 (1988), p. 45; see also Lorraine M. York "The Habits of Language Uniform(ity), Transgression and Margaret Atwood" *Canadian Literature* 126 Autumn (1990), pp. 6–19 for a discussion of the use of uniforms in Atwood's fictions, including the childhood uniforms of the Brownies in *Lady Oracle*.

³⁴ The corset is used also in *Lilian's Story* as a representation of a specific form of docile femininity. See chapter five.

Despite Marian's discomfort with mature-age women and her attempts to distance herself from the aging body, she is associated with them in the text. She experiences a disintegration and expansion that mirrors the process of aging she fears. She becomes fat. But mature-age women are not, however, the only fat women within *The Edible Woman*, and Marian has similar difficulties with the fat pregnant body, again a body (dis)figured through another "natural" process. Pregnancy is the place where "[w]omen literally embody the opposition, or contradiction, between worlds", being autonomous and occupied simultaneously.³⁵ Once again this is a figure that both confirms and subverts stereotypes of femininity. It is, like the mature-age bodies, a site of contradiction and conflict.

The pregnant woman, as well as the mature-age woman, has a fat body that transgresses the boundaries of the feminine, through the inability to limit the size of belly and breast; "[p]regnancy, like food, makes one fat".³⁶ Pregnancy is the physical site of a "lack of control" (excess) and "ultra-control" (state and/or institutional intervention into the process of pregnancy). Various discourses (medical, scientific, patriarchal, pro-natalist, pro-choice among others) vie for dominance over the pregnant woman. The discourse of "motherhood", historically and politically specific (as well as being class and race specific), provides the frame for interventions to be justified and enacted (In vitro-fertilisation, abortion, infanticide, eugenics, adoption).³⁷ Pregnant women are treated or responded to differently on the basis of class, ethnicity and colour. Eugenicist policies in Australia in the early twentieth century, for example, focused on middle-class white women for increasing the population of the nation. Black women and working-class women, by contrast, were not encouraged to have children, were administered contraception without consent or disclosure, and were understood by colonists to be a

³⁵ Emily Martin, *The Woman In The Body: a cultural analysis of reproduction* (Milton Keynes: Open UP, 1989), p. 197.

³⁶ Barbara Hill Rigney, *Margaret Atwood* (Basingstoke: MacMillan, 1987), p. 23.

³⁷ See K.M. Reiger, *The Disenchantment of the Home: modernizing the Australian family 1880-1940* (Melbourne: Oxford UP, 1985); see also Lynette Finch, *The Classing Gaze*.

threat to the population goals of “white Australia”.³⁸ Added to the layers of social management and construction of the pregnant body for broader “national” goals, is an underlying cultural unease. Marian’s response to her two pregnant friends, Clara and Ainsley — “two parodic versions of earth-mothers”³⁹ — says much about Marian’s own expectations about body, and the difficulties of negotiating dominant discourses about the female body.

Marian experiences the expansion of pregnancy as threatening. As with mature-age women, pregnancy is a site of powerful cultural disempowerment, of increasingly enforced passivity. For Marian, pregnancy seems to be yet another trap, representing the limited options of her sex. Her unease stems from two sources: her desire to have “choice”, and her desire to be “feminine” in a Canadian context. Within the terms of the novel these desires are contradictory and troublesome.

Clara, Marian’s old friend, and Ainsley, her flatmate, embody Marian’s fears of losing control. These two women have different experiences of pregnancy; Clara is passive and burdened by child bearing, whereas Ainsley sees pregnancy as an essential experience: “[e]very woman should have at least one baby... It’s even more important that sex. It fulfils your deepest femininity” (p. 41 *ew*). Clara is married when she falls pregnant; Ainsley is not. Clara’s pregnancy is “the lot of the married woman” (according to her husband Joe), whereas Ainsley seeks child birth as the means to fulfil her “innate” maternal desire. Both women fill Marian with pity and fear.

Clara’s lack of order and command over her living environment extends to her pregnancies. Marian remembers sharing a room with Clara at College. There Clara was “passive”:

³⁸ See Emily Martin, “Science and Women’s Bodies” in Mary Jacobus, Evelyn Fox Keller & Sally Shuttleworth (eds), *Body/Politics*; Paula A. Treichler, “Feminism, Medicine, and the Meaning of Childbirth”, in Mary Jacobus, Evelyn Fox Keller & Sally Shuttleworth (eds), *Body/Politics*; Judy Wajcman *Feminism Confronts Technology* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1991).

³⁹ Coral Ann Howells, *Margaret Atwood*, p. 42.

She simply stood helpless while the tide of dirt rose round her, unable to stop it or evade it. The babies were like that too; her own body seemed somehow beyond her, going its own way without reference to any directions of hers. (p. 37 *ew*)

This passivity continues as Clara's diet and digestion are subject to the vagaries of her "condition"; "A little vermouth for me, darling. I can't drink anything else these days, it upsets my bloody stomach" (p. 33 *ew*). Clara's apparent "lack of control" over her appetite foregrounds Marian's own crisis, as she is also progressively unable to consume types of food, and experiences decreasing control over her body.

Notions of individualism, autonomy and "personal integrity" are brought into question through pregnancy, with consumption and action centred upon another being.^a This threatening transgression has generated a deep cultural fear of gestation because pregnancy not only makes one fat but, as it is popularly constructed, "also represents a loss of autonomy, an alien presence in one's own body which directs action, in effect, takes over".⁴⁰ For Marian, Clara is both possessed (bodily) and consuming, the "boa-constrictor that has swallowed a watermelon" (p. 31 *ew*). As her pregnancy progresses she becomes more and more "of the body" and subsequently during

the later, more vegetable stage of Clara's pregnancy she [Marian] had tended to forget that Clara had a mind at all or any perceptive faculties above the merely sentient and sponge-like, since she had spent most of her time being absorbed in, or absorbed by, her tuberous abdomen. (p. 130 *ew*)

Clara is defined solely by her pregnancy, an amorphous body, a shape shifter. She is (dis)figured.

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⁴⁰ Barbara Hill Rigney, *Margaret Atwood*, p. 23.

Ainsley is also consumed by pregnancy, and she has been “getting a layer of blubber on her soul... aren’t hormones wonderful. Soon she would be fat all over” (p. 160 *ew*). She is subsumed by a discourse of motherhood that explains cultural constructions in essentialist terms. Ainsley plans her pregnancy as the fulfilment of women’s innate maternalism (p. 157 *ew*), justified, in part, by various university courses she completed (anthropology and psychology). She is sexually attractive, certainly Len “the father” initially finds her so. She is extremely fertile (although carefully planned, it took only one encounter for conception), and she is motivated by a desire to reproduce. Yet, as is to be expected in an Atwood text, things are not so simple.

Ainsley intends to become a single parent, and she carefully plans her seduction of the unsuspecting Len. In a humorous scene, Ainsley “traps” him into sexual intercourse by playing on his penchant for young girls, dressing and acting like a young virgin, the temptress of old.⁴¹ On her first meeting with Len she appears in full costume

She had dug out from somewhere a cotton summer creation I’d [Marian had] never seen before, a pink and light-blue gingham check on white with a ruffle around the neck. Her hair was tied behind her head with a pink bow and on one of her wrists she had a tinkly silver charm-bracelet. Her makeup was understated, her eyes carefully but not noticeably shadowed to make them twice as large and round and blue, and she had sacrificed her long oval fingernails, biting them nearly to the quick so that they had a jagged schoolgirlish quality. (pp. 67–68 *ew*)

⁴¹ See Karen Dubinsky, “‘Maidenly Girls’ or ‘Designing Women’?: the crime of seduction in turn-of-the-century Ontario” in Franca Iacovetta and Mariana Valverde (eds), *Gender Conflicts: new essays in women’s history* (Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press, 1992) for a discussion of the attempts to legislate for the protection of female innocence and purity. According to Karen Dubinsky the legislation in practice became a means to determine the morality of the woman, hence the notion of the designing woman who seeks to entrap a man (through pregnancy and subsequent marriage), and the maidenly girl led astray. It is these moral stereotypes that Atwood parodies through the character Ainsley.

Len is hooked by the performance, and Ainsley, after careful manoeuvring, secures her coupling, with Len still believing in his own strategies and prowess.

Ainsley appears to offer a re-working of the marriage/pregnancy cycle represented by Clara and the mature-age women at Marian's office. She disapproves of Clara and Joe's household, as it does not provide an "ideal situation for a child. Think how confused their mother-image and their father-image will be; they're riddled with complexes already" (p. 40 *ew*). The limitations of her maternalist discourse, however, become clear as she is ultimately unable to remain outside of marriage.

Her distance from marriage is undermined by the very discourses that she privileges. At pre-natal classes Ainsley is informed that a father figure for a child is essential, thus bringing independent (single) parenting into question. She tells Marian: "'They've proved it scientifically.' She gulped. 'If I have a little boy, he's absolutely *certain* to turn into a ho-ho-ho-homosexual!'" (p. 181 *ew*). Desperate to "normalise" her child she attempts to entice Len into a marriage which he fundamentally opposes. Instead, she is rescued from humiliation (Len had poured beer over her head at the engagement party), by Fischer, a postgraduate student and flatmate of Duncan's:

"Allow me," he said to her, "we wouldn't want you to catch a chill, would we? Not in your condition." He began to dry her off with his sweater. His eyes were damp with solicitude... She smiled up at him through the beer or tears beading her eyelashes. "I don't believe we've met," she said.

"I think I already know who you are," he said, patting her belly tenderly with one of his striped sleeves, his voice heavy with symbolic meaning". (p. 241 *ew*)

Before meeting Ainsley, Fischer lived with Marian's lover, Duncan, in a same-sex parody of the nuclear family. Duncan was the child, and Fischer and another flat-mate, Trevor, were parental figures. All three were graduate students, with Fischer writing a thesis on Womb imagery in the works of D.H. Lawrence, Beatrix Potter and Lewis

Carroll. As a maternalist himself, Fischer is totally amenable to marriage, and Ainsley is re-incorporated into the marriage/maternal discourse. Thus woman's sexuality and reproduction remains contained within a socially-sanctioned institution, this time through a discourse of psychological necessity.

Marian is as sceptical about Ainsley's maternalism as she is repelled by Clara's passive pregnancies. Yet as she struggles to keep time and place in order she is faced with the transgression of that order by those same women. Clara's tuberous body is transgressing a discourse of control and constraint, one to which Marian is compelled to adhere to. She describes the pregnant Clara in passive, beastly, parasitic terms. But Clara is threatening precisely because she is passive where she should be active. She is unable to clean her home or look after her children "as a mother" and "housewife" is expected to do. Rather than Clara or Ainsley growing shapeless, however, it is Marian who rapidly becomes amorphous, spreading and out-of-control, like the piece of cardboard in a puddle (p. 218 *ew*). She keeps disintegrating until she stops internalising the discourses that maintain her powerlessness.

Howells argues that *The Edible Woman* is heavily influenced by Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), and the identification of the restrictive roles available to North American women; the dead-end job followed by marriage leading to the female malaise. According to Howells, Friedan was very critical of anthropologist Margaret Mead, "whose work on gender differences in primitive societies was popularly interpreted as a glorification of the female role, defined according to the biological function of childbearing".⁴² Marian's responses to her pregnant friends, then, represent a desire to evade her "feminine" destiny in the form of the passive feminine or the sacred mother.

Howells writes

Female bodies and biological processes like pregnancy, childbirth and menstruation figure in the novel, but they are

⁴² Coral Ann Howells, *Margaret Atwood*, p. 41.

treated with a measure of comic detachment. When viewed through Marian's eyes, sexually mature female bodies become grotesque and rather disgusting...⁴³

To this extent Marian is reacting to a dominant image of women which constructs particular manifestations of the female body as monstrous.

Within *The Edible Woman* there is little space for Marian. She does not expand in the form of celebrated or passive pregnancy, and she is not a mature-age woman. But as Marian disintegrates (her patriarchal femininity fracturing), she grows larger and shapeless in a parody of the other bodies, and in an embodiment of multiplicity and fatness. Marian's process of disintegration is, then, her means of regaining control over her body in the face of cultural forces that seek to contain, limit and consume the female body. Similarly, the mature-age and pregnant bodies are transgressive, expanding into existence.

When Marian acts and regains control over the narrative she does so by baking a cake in the shape of a woman, literalising the consumption of herself. The act of baking the cake is a way of actualising the link between herself and the other women, the fat, mature-age, and pregnant women. The eating of cake echoes the Christmas party where the women gorged upon each other's food in a socially-sanctioned yet transgressive act of consumption. Bakhtin characterises such sites of social and political reversal as "carnavalesque".⁴⁴ This contesting of dominant discourses and structures of power is contained within a festive site, and provides the space to challenge and invigorate social systems. There is a well established tradition of women bringing and consuming food (often home-made) to communal events which sits uneasily with the social expectation that women restrict their intake of food. The Christmas feast, then, is a site where the

⁴³ Coral Ann Howells, *Margaret Atwood*, p. 44.

⁴⁴ See Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1984), and Kathleen Rowe, *The Unruly Woman*.

conservative tradition of women providing the food for social functions (ladies a plate⁴⁵), allows the transgression of the denial of appetite that women conventionally practice. The women bring the food and eat it too.⁴⁶ Marian says of the ritual and the women,

[w]hat peculiar creatures they were; and the continual flux between the outside and the inside, taking things in, giving them out, chewing, words, potato-chips, burps, grease, hair, babies, milk, excrement, cookies, vomit, coffee, tomato-juice, blood, tea, sweat, liquor, tears, and garbage... (p. 167 *ew*)

It is immediately after her consumption of the cake that the narration returns to the first person, in the third and final section of the novel. Refocused on herself, and extricated from a pattern of passive, reactive responses, Marian begins to put her life back in order, although as Margaret Atwood notes in the introduction, “my heroine’s choices remain much the same, at the end of the book as they are at the beginning: a career going nowhere, or marriage as an exit from it” (p8 *ew*). Nevertheless Marian has, at the very least, become like the older and pregnant women. As Duncan says to Marian before eating the remainder of the cake, “you’re back to so-called reality, you’re a consumer”, and indeed she is.

⁴⁵ “Ladies a Plate” is a well known New Zealand expression and is the tradition of women bringing the food for social gatherings. According to Phyllis Herda, the New Zealand tradition of “Ladies a Plate” and the identification of New Zealand women with food is “undoubtedly, part of the heritage of Anglo-Saxon immigration”. It is not surprising, then, to find similarities with Australia and Canada; Phyllis Herda, “Ladies a Plate: Women and Food” in Julie Park (ed), *Ladies a Plate: change and continuity in the lives of New Zealand women* (Auckland: Auckland UP, 1991), p. 171.

⁴⁶ This draws upon the anthropological theory of ritual reversal and ritual rebellion. This is the idea that on a set occasion, for a defined period of time, everyday structures of society are inverted or rebelled against. Such occasions act as a safety valve for the community and also contain dissent within socially-sanctioned sites of disobedience or civil disorder. In this case I am arguing that the women’s feasting on food at the office Christmas party is an example of ritual rebellion where “normal” constraints are rejected, and the women revel in consumption of forbidden foods. This can also be read in terms of Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of the carnivalesque.

In *Lady Oracle* Joan Foster nee Delacourt, famous poet and secret costume Gothic writer, disappears. She fakes her death (a drowning in Lake Ontario) and runs away to Terremoto, an “exotic” Italian village. Upon her arrival she assumes a disguise. She cuts and dyes her hair, donning sun-glasses and a head-scarf. It is an inexpensive form of cosmetic surgery, a re-alignment and re-definition of appearance. Joan buries her Canadian escapee clothing in the ground, and assumes a new identity, a new form, a new body. This new incarnation is limited, however, as Joan is recognised by the villagers from a previous visit, and is eventually tracked down by a reporter following the story of the mysterious death of the leading author. As the novel progresses it becomes clear that Joan’s life has been full of such metamorphoses, and whilst attempting to present a “unified” self, Joan has continually revised and reconstructed herself. She goes through physical changes, with her body dramatically altering in size in an inversion of the growth process; she gains pounds during childhood and adolescence, and “reduces” in adulthood. Through this process Joan re-invents herself, yet throughout the text she is shadowed by her fat self. Rather like the transparency of her Terremoto disguise, Joan can never manage to dispose of her larger, substantial body.

While Marian has a problem with eating centred around a type of anorexia, Joan has a problem with fatness. As a child, Joan expands into obesity, reaching 245 pounds by age fifteen. By age nineteen, however, Joan has left her fat body behind through a rigorous regime of dieting and exercise. She also leaves Canada for London. But despite her new svelte body, Joan’s fear of fatness stays with her, expressed through the presence of a fantasy figure, the “fat lady”.

Joan, like Marian, associates fat with age and invisibility. As a child she was able to get into restricted movies because “all fat women look the same, they all look forty-two” (p. 82 *lo*). Forty-two disguises the older body as well as the younger one. Joan surmises that “fat woman are not more noticeable than thin women; they’re less noticeable, because people find them distressing and look away” (p. 82 *lo*). Because they are outside the definition of feminine attractiveness, fat women are rendered invisible: “To the ushers and the ticket sellers I must’ve appeared as a huge featureless blurr” (p. 82 *lo*).

Later, when Joan is on a diet, she describes herself this way:

I was still overweight and I was still baggy. There were stretch marks on my thighs, and my face was that of a thirty-five-year-old housewife with four kids and a wandering husband: I looked worn down. (p. 137 *lo*)

The slack, shapeless body is associated with a woman of about fifteen years older than Joan. Interestingly it is younger than the forty-two year old fat body. Fatness, then, is associated with the process of aging, with a level of fatness indicating age. The slim body, however, remains youthful.

Joan herself moves from fat invisibility to thin visibility:

The wide expanse of flesh that had extended like a sand dune from my chin to my ankles began to recede, my breasts and hips rising from it like islands. Strange men, whose gaze **had** previously slid over and around me as though I wasn't there, began to look at me from truck-cab windows and construction sites; a speculative look, like a dog eyeing a fire hydrant. (pp. 122–23 *lo*)

Her first lover, the London-based Polish Count, tells her that she has “the body of a goddess”. She responds:

But which goddess did he mean? There was more than one, I knew. The one on the Venus pencil package, for instance, with no arms and all covered with cracks. Some goddesses didn't have bodies at all; there was one in the museum, three heads on top of a pillar, like a fire hydrant. Many were shaped like vases, many like stones. I found his compliment ambiguous. (p. 142 *lo*)

The goddess body that the Count so admires in Joan is, however, only recently acquired. Uncomfortable and unconvinced by her metamorphosis into the stereotypically attractive female figure of “the goddess”, Joan is unable to make sense of the “compliment”.

The ambiguity of the goddess comment stems from the multiple meanings of goddess, summoning images of perfection and monstrosity simultaneously. Marilyn Patton points out that Atwood’s presentation of the goddess is a reworking and conflation of mythical figures in Robert Graves’s *The White Goddess*, with his patriarchal rendering of the goddess as an “anti-domestic” muse.⁴⁷ Patton argues that

[i]n her own versions of the Goddess, Atwood condenses fears of being large and fat, fears of being powerful, fears of devouring or overpowering lovers and children, and the fear of being a writer. Finally, because she is the Triple Goddess, of multiple identities, she represents the difficulty of coming to a sense of one “true” single identity, the Self, a goal which Western culture has invoked as the great desideratum.⁴⁸

Joan is only too aware of the various meanings of the Goddess, as she carries a feeling of duplicity and monstrosity within her own “goddess” form. The Goddess in *Lady Oracle* becomes an image and expression of multiplicity, and grows beyond patriarchal manifestations. As a child Joan was fat, an embodiment of the grotesque rather than the ideal goddess. By fifteen “I’d reached my maximum growth: I was five feet eight and weighed two hundred and forty-five, give or take a few pounds” (p. 74 *lo*).

Critics have viewed this haunting fatness as negative, linking fat to the grotesque. In some readings the fat child is a monstrosity that needs to be escaped from so that Joan can then express other aspects of her self. The fat child is, for critic Barbara Godard,

⁴⁷ Marilyn Patton, “‘Lady Oracle’: the politics of the body” *Ariel* 22:4 October (1991), p. 30.

⁴⁸ Marilyn Patton, “‘Lady Oracle’”, p. 31. For a discussion of the female writer as picaro see Lucy M. Freibert, “The Artist as Picaro: the revelation of Margaret Atwood’s ‘Lady Oracle’” *Canadian Literature* 92 (1982), pp. 23–33.

“symbolic of her mother’s monstrous creation”.⁴⁹ The monster is recuperated within her paper but the fat/monster still remains a negative image, shackles unable to be completely “shucked-off” (p. 91 *lo*):

Even though in her new thinness Joan indeed undergoes such a metamorphosis, the fact that she remains encumbered in her mental image of herself with the Fat Girl’s body makes this an incomplete change.⁵⁰

For Emily Jensen, Joan’s traumatic, fat childhood gives way to a thin adulthood where concerns of body are replaced by those about self and professional respect,

[t]hus, Joan’s negative image of herself that persists through adulthood, long after she has lost her childhood fat, concerns her work and not her body; for her, approval or disapproval of her work *means* acceptance or rejection of her as a person.⁵¹

Despite being left behind in childhood, the fat self is the origin of the negative self image, and is the site of trauma and ridicule.

Nora Foster Stovel understands Joan’s weight loss as freeing her from a “possessive” and “repressive” mother, and allowing her development into a Gothic romance writer, as “Joan’s self, long submerged in flesh, finally surfaces” after the dieting.⁵² The idea that flesh may conceal the self suggests that fat is a disguise rather than an enlarged version of the person. Under such a paradigm the overweight woman

⁴⁹ Barbara Godard, “My (m)Other, My Self: strategies for subversion in Atwood and Hébert” *Essays on Canadian Writing* 26 Summer (1983), pp. 36–37.

⁵⁰ Barbara Godard, “My (m)Other, My Self”, pp. 30–31.

⁵¹ Emily Jensen, “Margaret Atwood’s *Lady Oracle*: a modern parable” *Essays on Canadian Writing* 33 Fall (1986), p. 34. Italics in original.

⁵² Nora Foster Stovel, “Reflections on Mirror Images”, pp. 56–57.

would seem to have less integrity than the slender woman, whose “true self” is so much more visible.⁵³

Despite her pleasure in her reduction, inspired finally by the sight of her outsized thigh — “It was enormous, it was gross, it was like a diseased limb, the kind you see in pictures of jungle natives...” (p. 121 *lo*) — Joan feels defenceless and insubstantial after her weight loss, and senses that part of her is (paradoxically) concealed. Thinness places her body in view but it also hides it behind discourses of attractiveness. Joan experiences thinness as a loss and lack, as a vulnerability. When she reduces she is “liberated” from weight, from “invisibility” and asexuality, but is also left defenceless. Without her flesh she “felt naked, pruned, as though some essential covering was missing” (p. 141 *lo*). This covering, the insulation, “a cocoon”, was protection from objectification and harassment, visibility translating it into (hetero)sexual objectification. With her layer of fat,

[i]t would have been like molesting a giant basket-ball, and secretly, though I treasured images of myself exuding melting femininity and soft surrender, I knew I would be able to squash any potential molester against a wall merely by breathing out. (p. 140 *lo*)

The very threat of fatness and the ability to protect oneself is brought into focus, saying much about fashions of femininity that embody passivity and vulnerability.

Like Marian, Joan projects her discomfort with her own disintegration and multiplicity on to the bodies of mature-age women. These women are associated with narratives of decay and fatness. Through Joan’s interaction with her mother, Aunt, and the Fat Lady, it is possible to trace Joan’s attempts to reconcile her own multiplicity

⁵³ In *Femininity and Domination* Sandra Bartky writes: “[w]omen regarded as overweight, for example, report that they are regularly admonished to diet, sometimes by people they scarcely know. These intrusions are sometimes often softened by a reference to the natural prettiness just waiting to emerge” p. 74.

within the containing discourse, and see the extent to which all four women expand beyond the containment of their bodies.

Mrs Delacourt is a sour, thin, woman disappointed by her daughter's inability to reflect her own image.⁵⁴ Joan comments of her mother:

If she'd ever decided what she really wanted to do and had gone out and done it, she wouldn't have seen me as a reproach to her, the embodiment of her own failure and depression, a huge edgeless cloud of inchoate matter which refused to be shaped into anything for which she could get a prize. (p. 67 *lo*)

But Mrs Delacourt is seemingly caught within the very romance plot that Joan later constructs in her Gothic romance novels, spending a large amount of time sitting in front of a triple-sided mirror. Hers is a femininity that demands constant vigilance and sculpting. As Judith McCombs puts it,

Joan's mother was an embittered Canadian Rapunzel, trapped in the feminine mistake, unloving and unloved, false-mouthed as Betty Davis of the films' myths, triple-headed in her triple vanity mirror, a Cerebus, an evil Queen.⁵⁵

Although "keeping her figure" (p. 68 *lo*) Mrs Delacourt is doomed to misery as long as she looks to a mirror to affirm herself. Mirrors are never a refuge in Atwood's fiction, instead they "become symbols of the fragmented self, providing a distorted image of the self, stealing one's sense of real or complete self, robbing one of an identity".⁵⁶ Mrs Delacourt is another of the women in Canadian literature whom Atwood describes as "women who would rather be Dianas or Venuses but find themselves trapped against

⁵⁴ See Kim Chernin, *The Hungry Self: women, eating, and identity* (London: Virago, 1985), for a discussion about generational change, and mother-daughter relationships.

⁵⁵ Judith McCombs, "Atwood's fictitious portraits of the artist: from victim to surfacer, from oracle to birth" *Women's Studies* 12 (1986), p. 78.

⁵⁶ Barbara Godard, "My (m)Other, My Self", p. 20.

their will inside Hecates”.⁵⁷ Atwood was commenting upon the tendencies within Canadian fictions to stereotype women as embittered or embattled older women who looked back on their lives with a degree of regret.

As a child, Joan watched her mother put on her make-up and execute a number of beauty treatments:

I would stare at the proceedings, fascinated and mute. I thought my mother was very beautiful, even more beautiful when she was colored in. And this was what I did in the dream: I sat and stared... my mother always had a triple mirror, so she could see both sides as well as the front of her head. In the dream, as I watched, I suddenly realized that instead of three reflections she had three actual heads, which rose from her toweled shoulders on three separate necks. (pp. 66–67 *lo*)

Joan remarks, “This didn’t frighten me, as it seemed merely a confirmation of something I’d always known... my mother was a monster” (p. 67 *lo*). The interplay between the monstrous and attractive goddess is constant throughout the novel. This is the same type of femininity that Marian negotiates when she prepares for her engagement party. By comparison, however, Marian is disconcerted by what she sees in the mirror, especially when she is “colored in”, “afraid even to blink, for fear that this applied face would crack and flake with the strain” (p. 222 *ew*).

Despite her diligence Mrs Delacourt is unable to achieve an adequate degree of attractiveness. After many hours in front of the mirror she is still unhappy:

these sessions appeared to make her sadder, as if she saw behind or within the mirror some fleeting image she was unable to capture or duplicate; and when she was finished she was always a little cross. (p. 66 *lo*)

⁵⁷ Margaret Atwood, *Survival*, p. 209.

While Marian runs from the fixed image in the form of a photograph, Mrs Delacourt turns herself into a static body, stationary in front of the mirror, seeking solace and affirmation from a “reflection” that highlights her inadequacies. Kamler and Feldman use the story of Snow White to illustrate the negative narratives about female aging, and the role that the mirror plays within these narratives:

It is the mirror... that has the ultimate authority in this tale to speak the truth. It is the mirror that tells the stepmother she is no longer fair. The queen never doubts the mirror because, we are told, the mirror does not lie... Like contemporary Western culture, the mirror privileges youth above age. It foregrounds beauty and physical appearance as the measure of a woman's social worth and equates the physical signs of aging with a fearful evil that must be destroyed.⁵⁸

The attractive goddess body, then, proves itself to be transitory and unreliable. Achievement of the romantically-desirable body can only be temporary, for encoded into the body of the goddess is the grotesque with the very process of aging translating the attractive goddess into a grotesque body. Mrs Delacourt, through her daughter's gaze, turns into a monster.

Joan was also a monster for her mother. Throughout her childhood Joan and her mother fought over Joan's “excessive” body. She tormented Mrs Delacourt throughout adolescence:

I swelled visibly, restlessly, before her very eyes, I rose like dough, my body advanced inch by inch towards her across the dinning-room table, in this at least I was undefeated. (p. 70 *lo*)

⁵⁸ Barbara Kamler & Susan Feldman, “Mirror Mirror on the wall”, p. 2.

Nevertheless, Joan did eventually lose weight, transforming, fairytale-like, into a “beautiful butterfly” or Cinderella, and after intense dieting,⁵⁹

[s]uddenly I was down to the required weight, and I was face to face with the rest of my life. I was now a different person, and it was like being born fully grown at the age of nineteen... (p. 141 *lo*)

This is the first most visible transformation of Joan’s life, but the ramifications of reducing, and re-shaping pursue Joan through the rest of the novel.

Moreover, Joan’s changing body also has ramifications for her mother. Joan’s transformation from fat obscurity into thin visibility fulfils the patriarchal romantic dream (and fairytale) but contained within this paradigm is the superseding of the older woman. Although it is Joan who diets it is Mrs Delacourt who disintegrates, becoming less powerful, and ultimately disappearing:

While I grew thinner, she herself became distraught and uncertain. She was drinking quite heavily now... At times she would almost plead with me to stop taking the pills, to take better care of myself; then she would have spasms of rage, a dishevelled piecemeal rage unlike her former purposeful fury. (p. 123 *lo*)

Mrs Delacourt, then, occupies the space of the embittered “menopausal woman”,⁶⁰ the evil queen surpassed by the young Snow White whose,

plaint is not only about beauty but also about aging. For her fears that her stepdaughter’s reputation for beauty will supplant her own, undermined by the process of aging.⁶¹

⁵⁹ See Barbara Godard, “My (m)Other, My Self”, p. 31, for discussions about the parody of fairytales in *Lady Oracle*.

⁶⁰ See Sandra Coney, *The Menopause Industry*, for a discussion of the construction of the “menopausal

Mrs Delacourt “drinks”, becomes “hysterical”, and ultimately dies, all in the fashion of the fallen version of the patriarchal mature-age woman.

Joan’s mother becomes an astral traveller and trails Joan throughout her adult life. Mrs Delacourt’s first appearance, even before her death, is at the spiritualist’s meeting that Joan attends with her Aunt, the second, upon the moment of her death, or so Joan believes. When Joan’s mother first appears she seems relatively young but is, nonetheless, associated with death. The medium sees

“...a woman standing behind your chair. She’s about thirty, with dark hair, wearing a navy-blue suit with a white collar and a pair of white gloves. She’s telling you... what? She’s very unhappy about something... I get the name *Joan*. I’m sorry, I can’t hear...” Leda Sprott listened for a minute, then said, “She couldn’t get through, there was too much static.”

“That’s my mother!” I said to Aunt Lou in a piercing whisper.

“She’s not even dead yet!” (pp. 110–11 *lo*)

Mrs Delacourt also appears in Joan’s mirror. When Joan attempts automatic writing, burning candles and gazing into a mirror, she is led through the mirror maze by a shadowy figure. The product of this journeying into the mirror is Joan’s literary masterpiece, “Lady Oracle”, the poem that echoes Tennyson’s “The Lady of Shallot”. As Stoval writes, “Joan realizes that it was always her mother standing on the other side of the mirror, inviting her into identity”.⁶² Jensen argues that Mrs Delacourt is both the muse and subject of Joan’s poem “Lady Oracle”:

Not only is her mother the voice behind the poems, she is also the primary subject of them... Joan claims not to know who the “enormously powerful”... woman in the poems is, but by the

woman”.

⁶¹ Lois W. Banner, *In Full Flower*, p. 182.

end of the *Lady Oracle*/"Lady of Shallott" sequence, she knows that the woman is her mother.⁶³

But Mrs Delacourt does not stay dead, and expanding beyond the confines of the mirror she flies around the world after her daughter. It seems that like Joan, Mrs Delacourt is unable to be constrained, and eventually her multiplicity has to be expressed. Joan remembers her mother,

sitting in front of her vanity table, painting her fingernails a murderous red and sighing. Her lips were thin but she made a larger mouth with lipstick over and around them, like Betty Davis, which gave her a curious double mouth, the real one showing through the false one like a shadow. (p. 68 *lo*)

Her mouth forever shows through the lipstick and her multiplicity becomes visible as she is unable to maintain the facade of the docile body. The double lips become the image of the youthful and aging Mrs Delacourt, and the ghostly figure she was to become. But most importantly they are an emblem of speech and multiplicity, "[t]hus, within herself, she is already two — but not divisible into one(s) — that caress each other".⁶⁴

Mrs Delacourt, then, expands beyond the body of the romantic, docile feminine, with a fluidity and movement in stark contrast to her attempts to fix her image in the mirror. Through her evasion of the reflected image, the ideal goddess is shown to be grotesque and, conversely, the monster is revealed as multi-dimensional subjectivity. She is a thin, contained, older woman, the evil step-mother, and a wandering spirit. The mature-age woman moves beyond the narratives of decay and the containment of aging.

The other mature-age woman who expands beyond narratives of aging and patriarchal femininity in *Lady Oracle* is Aunt Lou. In contrast to Joan's brittle coiffured mother, she "was soft, billowy, woolly, befurred; even her face, powered and rouged

⁶² Nora Foster Stovel, "Reflections on Mirror Images", p. 59.

⁶³ Emily Jensen, "Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle*", p. 42.

⁶⁴ Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, p. 24.

was covered in tiny hairs, like a bee" (p. 89 *lo*). But although Aunt Lou is soft and fat, "built like an Eaton's Catalog corset ad for the mature figure..." (p. 80 *lo*), she initiates Joan into patriarchal femininity. Furthermore, Louisa Delacourt is identified with a specific classed, raced body in Canada, as Eaton's Department Store has long been associated with white "urban bourgeois women".⁶⁵

Lou does offer Joan an alternative role model to that of her mother, telling Joan,

[t]hat's just the way I am... If other people can't handle it, that's their problem. Remember that, dear. You can't always choose your life, but you can learn to accept it. (p. 88 *lo*)

But as Joan herself comments, "[t]he only trouble was that the bits of wisdom she dispensed could have several meanings..." (p. 88 *lo*). This ambiguity stems from the contradictory meanings of Lou's body.

When Joan visits her Aunt for dinner, meeting Lou's lover for the first time, she finds Lou,

ornamented from head to toe. Things dangled from her, her wrists jingled, South Sea odors wafted from her. As she bustled about, putting the final touches to the feast she'd prepared, she seemed to warm and expand, filling the room. (p. 104 *lo*)

This image of Lou "ornamented from head to toe" is reminiscent of the statue of Diana of Ephesus "draped in breasts from neck to ankle..." (p. 253 *lo*).⁶⁶ In another example of a

⁶⁵ Cynthia Wright, "'Feminine Trifles of Vast Importance': writing gender into the history of consumption" in Franca Iacovetta & Mariana Valverde (eds), *Gender Conflicts*, p. 230. Wright looks at the history of Eaton's College Street store, established in 1928, and the way the store was marketed and popularly understood to be a site of emancipation through the act of consumption for middle-class women, and a place of employment for working-class women. The catalogue (which reminds Joan of Lou) marks the change in Canadian sales/retail patterns from local purchase to distance (catalogue) purchase. Interestingly, Joan buys her wedding dress when she marries Arthur from Eaton's budget floor, p. 199 *lo*.

⁶⁶ Marilyn Patton argues that the statue of Diana of Ephesus with the disjunction between the grotesque multiple breasts and the serene head "encapsulates the complete lack of fit between mind and body", and

body that is contradictory and multiple, Aunt Lou is a “Diana of Ephesus”, a fairy Godmother, a career woman, mature-age woman, and (to use the language of romance), is the “mistress” of a married man.

Although Lou seems to be uncontained by narratives of consumption through her size, she is complicit in those very narratives. Not only does she have the body of an “Eaton’s Catalog corset ad for the mature figure...”, but she also lends her face and name to a product that markets a specific femininity. Louisa Delacourt works as the head of public relations for a company marketing tampons and sanitary pads. Her photograph and signature are included in a company pamphlet that advises women on the etiquette of menstruation, “hints for tennis games and high-school proms... wardrobe suggestions... advice on washing your hair”(p. 85 *lo*). A reduced and refined Lousia is depicted on the pamphlet,

a picture of Aunt Lou, smiling maternally but professionally, taken before her jowls were quite so large. Around her neck was a single strand of pearls. Although she did wear pearls in real life, it was never just one strand. (p. 85 *lo*)

Her “maternal” image is mobilised to legitimate the advertising copy — “I didn’t really write that booklet, you know. That was written by Advertising” (p. 85 *lo*) — and as such Louisa is participating in a discourse of sanitised femininity.

Louisa also takes Joan to the movies, to see films like *Interrupted Melody* and *The Red Shoes*. These films perpetuate a docile romantic femininity. The trips to the movies are occasions of “approved sniveling” and feasting, and

[i]n the lobby we would stock up on pocket-packs of Kleenex, popcorn and candy bars; then we would settle down in the furry, soothing darkness for several hours of guzzling and sniffing, as

depicts the overwhelming burden the maternal expectations placed upon women. Marilyn Patton, ““Lady Oracle””, p. 34.

the inflated heroines floating before us on the screen were put through the wringer. (p. 81 *lo*)

The heroines were inflated by their projection onto the screen, and by discourses of stardom. The inclusion of details about the quantity of food consumed along with the film — “I ate three boxes of popcorn while Judy Garland tried to cope with an alcoholic husband...” (p. 81 *lo*) — underlines the connections between sites of socially sanctioned consumption, which in this case is the consumption of the women’s enlarged screen bodies, and the “binge” eating.

But Louisa does more than introduce Joan to romantic discourses, and on her death she provides Joan with two thousand dollars in her will, on the proviso that Joan lose one hundred pounds. Louisa, then, provides Joan with an income, and the ability to consume legitimately (as opposed to bingeing in the dark) but only if she has the appropriate body, the slim, attractive, white, first-world, female body of the consumer. The irony is that Louisa herself occupied an outsized version of this form. But Aunt Lou’s transgression of the slim white consumer is recuperated through her maternal form constructed for public consumption. Aunt Lou, then, does not fit the romance formula, and it is the contradictions and ambiguity in Lou’s life that undermine the romantic discourse within which she situates Joan.

Despite this ambiguity, however, Aunt Lou achieves a dimension beyond the grave that belies the containment of maturing narratives. Joan uses her aunt’s name, Louisa K. Delacourt as an alias when she leaves home, and later as her pen name for her popular costume Gothic romance novels. Aunt Lou is thus identified with the patriarchal romance discourse as well as becoming another identity for Joan. Both Aunt Lou and Mrs Delacourt, then, are ambiguous, multi-dimensional characters who move beyond the rhetoric of aging through association with mythology, fairytale and stereotype. Aunt Lou is complicit within the codes of femininity that she expands beyond, and she and Mrs Delacourt can be seen as monstrous goddesses.

Like her mother and Aunt, Joan is constantly more than the image allows. Her fragmentation is literalised through the adoption of new identities, new bodies and new

names. But despite (or because of) this disintegration, Joan is uncontained within silencing categories. She expands beyond wife, lover, daughter, popular fiction writer and artist. She remains essentially uncomfortable with her multiplicity, however.

Although she diets herself down to the slim (goddess) body, Joan is not free from her fat past. She invests tremendous energy in obscuring her previous dimensions, and distancing herself from her fat. When she is confronted by Marlene, her childhood tormentor, from her days as a Brownie, she immediately feels her fat returning;

Wads of fat sprouted on my thighs and shoulders, my belly
bulged out like a Hubbard squash, a brown wool beret popped
through my scalp, bloomers coated my panic-stricken loins.
Tears swelled behind my eyes. Like a virus meeting an
exhausted throat, my dormant past burst into rank life. (p. 229
lo)

Joan is silenced by Marlene's reappearance, threatening the exposure of her carefully obscured past. Although her childhood fat was employed as a weapon against her mother it offered no protection against others, and resulted in her being ostracised and mocked. Joan's weight loss, then, was as defensive as it was liberating, as vulnerable as it was strengthening.

As well as concealing her past, Joan keeps expanding into new identities. After leaving the Polish Count and moving in with Arthur (who becomes her husband), Joan begins writing romance novels. She had become a romance writer through her association with the Polish Count who wrote hospital romances under the pen name, Mavis Quilp (p. 153 *lo*). Joan becomes a successful romance novelist whilst concealing her production and profit from Arthur.

Joan's foray into "serious" literature is also a success. She only tells Arthur once her text *Lady Oracle* has been accepted for publication, however, and she "invents" yet another identity, the popular media figure of Ms Joan Foster (p. 238 *lo*). Upon beginning her affair with the Royal Porcupine (Chuck Brewer, a concrete artist), whom she meets at a book launch, Joan comments

[t]his was the beginning of my double life. But hadn't my life always been double? There was always that shadowy twin, thin when I was fat, fat when I was thin... But not twin even, for I was more than double, I was triple, multiple, and now I could see that there was more than one life to come, there were many.
(p. 246 *lo*)

Multiplicity, then, is experienced as disintegration.

What Joan doesn't gain by losing weight is a greater control over her life. If anything she is more passive. In hiding in Terremoto she writes herself into *Stalked by Love*, her final romance novel, and is tormented by dreams of the Fat Lady who reminds her of her own compromises and duplicity (p. 95 *lo*). She adopts serial renewal as a means to negotiate the contradictory demands placed upon her; to be thin, (hetero)sexual, chaste, intelligent, homely, attractive, sexy, unavailable, and married. The contradictions between her internal and external worlds are manifest as fat and thin selves. It is but a short step to the monster she feels herself to be when finally rejecting the Royal Porcupine: "I felt like a monster, a large, blundering monster, irredeemably shallow" (p. 271 *lo*).

One of the manifestations of Joan's fear of fatness and disintegration is the Fat Lady — the composite figure who haunts her imagination throughout *Lady Oracle*. Joan has fantasies about an obese woman, sparked initially by the enticing and forbidden tent of "The Fat Lady" at the Royal Canadian Exhibition. That Joan's Fat Lady is explicitly linked to the "exotic freak show" foregrounds the extent to which the Fat Lady is a parody of archetypal comical figures. To "speak of 'fat ladies' at all — a phrase reverberating with the suggestion of the circus freak — is to embark on a series of judgements...", and these judgements are about self-control and (ab)normality.⁶⁷ As Joan says, "nobody regarded being fat as a misfortune; it was viewed simply as a disgusting failure of will" (p. 90 *lo*).

⁶⁷ Mary Conde, "Fat Ladies and Food", p. 6.

The Fat Lady both haunts and comforts Joan, being a figure of inspiration and disgust. This figure embodies Joan's shame over her adolescent body, her fat anonymity, and she dresses in the clothes of Joan's youth. But even in "fantasy" Joan is restricted by the social construction of the feminine:

[a]s for the Fat Lady, I knew perfectly well that after her death-defying feat she had to return to the freak show, to sit in her over-sized chair with her knitting and be gaped at by the ticket-buyers [at the Royal Canadian Exhibition]. That was her real life.
(p. 103 *lo*)

Later, when Joan's hold on her "fantasy world" is more precarious and the distinctions between fantasy and reality are harder to maintain, she sees the Fat Lady falling:

My old daydreams about the Fat Lady returned, only this time she'd be walking across her tightrope, in her pink tutu, and she'd fall, in slow motion, turning over and over on the way down... (p. 251 *lo*)

Whereas in *The Edible Woman* Marian perceives her own body as disintegrating, Joan's crisis is expressed through the vision of the Fat Lady.

The Fat Lady is large, yet insubstantial. At the point where Joan is compelled to tell her husband about her affair with the Royal Porcupine, the Fat Lady appears again, this time on the televised ice rink...

she was whirling around the rink with exceptional grace, spinning like a top on her tiny feet, then the thin man lifted her and threw her and she floated up, up, she hung suspended... her secret was that although she was so large, she was very light, she was hollow, like a helium balloon... (p. 273 *lo*)

But Joan imagines the television commentators, affronted by the floating woman's buttocks, moving to shoot her down (p. 274 *lo*). The audience (and commentators) police

the boundaries of “the feminine”, they are the voices of compliance speaking within Joan. The chorus demanding normality is heard everywhere, even in her head.

As the level of her deceit increases so too does her anxiety, and like Marian, Joan runs away. It is pursuit by a gossip columnist (who discovers the affair between Joan and the Concrete Artist), and Joan’s heightened anxiety about her and Arthur’s involvement in “urban terrorism”, that propels Joan to “suicide”. But this exit from Canada to Italy provides little solace, as Joan cannot escape from herself, and the frightening expansion of her own body. Here her life echoes both farce and Gothic romance as she hides in the Italian village, growing increasingly paranoid, fearing discovery by authorities for the crime of faking her death. She imagines herself under siege, fearing capture by hostile forces, and these fears take the form of being fattened up and dressed in black satin (p. 328 *lo*):

This is serious, I told myself. Pull yourself together. Perhaps I was becoming hysterical. I didn’t want to spend the rest of my life in a cage, as a fat whore, a captive Earth Mother for whom somebody else collected the admission tickets. (pp. 328–29 lo)

The sexualising and displaying of fat (flesh), and the explicit link to the goddess (“earth Mother”) presents the fat woman as silenced, and objectified.

In the context of Italy the Fat Lady is the object of desire (captive and exploited) whereas in the Canadian scenes she is asexual.⁶⁸ The possibility of being desirable through “fat” is presented to Joan as an adolescent when she is propositioned by the cook at a restaurant where she worked, “a bright-eyed foreigner, either Italian or Greek...” (p. 99 *lo*), living in Toronto. Joan declines his marriage proposal, realising later, “I was the shape of a wife already, I was the shape it took most women [in Terremoto] several years to become” (p. 101 *lo*). Paradoxically, she is the object of desire because of the maternal

⁶⁸ See Leslie Fielder, *Freaks: myths and images of the secret self* (New York: Doubleday, 1993) for a discussion of the different cultural responses to the fat lady, and the Italian tradition of celebration of voluptuous female sexuality.

shape of her body. Fat is again linked with mature-age bodies, and as such is constructed as non-sexual through the maternal discourse.

By contrast, the Fat Lady at the Royal Canadian Exhibition in Joan's imagination, is sexualised through a distancing technique. That is, she is cast as exotic in "gauze pants and a maroon satin brassiere, like the dancing girls, and red slippers" (p. 90 *lo*). Joan, then, projects the sexual-fat-woman into the Italian landscape, and "other" cultures (just as her fat thigh apparently resembled the diseased limb of "native" cultures, p. 121 *lo*), and conflates it with her fears of sexual objectification and entrapment. Thus fatness is shown to be contradictory, bound by context, culture and expectation. Joan fearfully imagines,

[w]ould they kill me and bury me in a gravelly grave among the olives? Or would they keep me in a cage and fatten me up as was done among primitive tribes in Africa, but with huge plates of pasta, would they make me wear black satin underwear like the kind advertised at the back of the *fotoromanzi*, would they charge admission to the men of the town, would I become one of those Fellini whores, gigantic and shapeless? (p. 328 *lo*)

Again, this echoes the horror of shapelessness and fear of being consumed expressed by Marian in *The Edible Woman*, but in *Lady Oracle* the horror of shapelessness and consumption is located in an/other landscape. Italy is used as an exotic location from which to comment upon peculiarly Canadian cultural practices. Atwood highlights the deliberate juxtaposition of Italian and Canadian cultural expression. Atwood said of *Lady Oracle* that Joan's lover, the concrete artist who collects and freezes dead animals, is a

direct reference to my own book of criticism, *Survival*, as well as the whole tradition of Canadian animal stories. In Italy the animals come in rococo poses. They're all a lot of stuffed

animals, but they're all very Italian expressionist things... But for Canada they have to be squashed and frozen.⁶⁹

Italian culture is expressive whilst Canadian culture is repressive and cold.

But the exotic other is extended beyond Italy to include Africa, the unspecified dark interior of empire that is so threatening to “white women” in colonial discourses. This further contextualises Joan’s issue with fatness and multiplicity within a specific culture, in this case, a British colonial heritage. Furthermore, the other cultures are known only through stereotype, “primitive Africa” and “*fotoromanzi* Italy”, so are in fact not known at all. The reference to the films of Italian film-maker Fellini is juxtaposed with the North American Hollywood romances which Joan avidly devoured, again locating Joan’s perceptions of place and culture within a North American, colonial frame.

The fat body as the binary opposite to the ideal (goddess) body (that is the monstrous versus ideal goddess) is a negative image associated with decay, and aging. Fat women are both ageless and old, shapeless and ample. This figure, the powerful negative that Joan fears — the featureless blur who grows from Joan’s buried clothes in *Terremoto*, “[l]ike a big thigh... a face like a breast minus the nipple” (p. 321 *lo*) — is juxtaposed with the comical and vibrant image of the Fat Lady. She expands beyond the patriarchal binary, embodying both fears of expansion (the inability to contain the self) and multiplicity.

Marian MacAlpin and Joan Foster fall apart, disintegrating in the face of discourses of control. Being multi-dimensional women they cannot fully sublimate their excess into the one contained body, and so they fly apart, “dissolving, coming apart layer by layer like a piece of cardboard in a gutter puddle.” Their fear of disintegration is expressed as a fear of fatness and aging, these bodies being symbols of disintegration and lack of control. But the mature-age female body, the pregnant body, as well as the body of the Fat Lady, are more than negative discourses, expanding beyond narrative

⁶⁹ J.R. (Tim) Struthers, “Playing Around”, in Earl G. Ingersoll (ed), *Margaret Atwood*:

containment. Joan and Marian emulate the narratives of disintegration that surround aging and pregnancy, and in the process reveal the limitations of the docile body, expanding beyond one-dimensional passivity.

Chapter Four

Kerewin Holmes: “the ultimate in butch strangers, strange butchers”

Keri Hulme's novel *the bone people* has a controversial publishing history. The novel stormed into New Zealand consciousness unlike any previous text, winning the 1984 New Zealand Book Award, the Pegasus Award for Maori Literature, and the 1985 Booker McConnell Prize. It is a disturbing novel, about the entwined lives of Kerewin Holmes, Joe Gillayley and his (informally) adopted son Simon. But debates over Keri Hulme's authenticity threatened to overwhelm the issues within the novel. *the bone people* was an unpopular choice for the Booker Prize, and for prominent New Zealand critic, C.K. Stead, the award for Maori writing was inappropriate. According to Stead, “*the bone people* ... is a novel by a Pakeha which has won an award intended for a Maori.”¹

Keri Hulme's novel has been at the centre of discussions on the nature of New Zealand culture. The society that Hulme constructs in the novel fits Helen Tiffin's description of post-colonial cultures which are “inevitably hybridised, involving a dialectical relationship between European ontology and epistemology and the impulse to create or recreate independent local identity.”² The apparent miscegenation at the heart of the novel, that has posed problems for critics such as Stead, is an expression of post-colonialism. In its form, too, *the bone people* can be read as a post-colonial text with the

¹ C.K. Stead, “Bookered: Keri Hulme's *the bone people*”, *Answering To The Language: essays on modern writers* (Auckland: Auckland UP, 1989), p. 180. The debate over Keri Hulme's ethnic identification and “who can write as other” as Margery Fee expressed it, has dominated analysis of the text. See Margery Fee, “Why C.K. Stead didn't like Keri Hulme's *the bone people*: who can write as other?” *Australian and New Zealand Studies in Canada* 1 Spring (1989), pp. 11–32; see also chapter seven for a more detailed discussion of the Pegasus award for Maori Literature.

² Helen Tiffin, “Post-Colonial Literatures and Counter-Discourse” *Kunapipi* 9:3 (1987), p. 17.

decentring of colonial narratives and inter-weaving of cultures and histories. Rod Edmond argues that *the bone people* is “best seen as distinctively post-colonial, resisting both the old and new dominant forms of Anglo-European fiction.”³ Furthermore, the reworking by Hulme of the classic texts of colonialism and post-colonialism, *Robinson Crusoe* and *The Tempest*, where “Prospero and Caliban, Friday and Crusoe, are dispersed across the three central characters into new, uncertain hybrids” suggests a decentring of imperial mythology.⁴

The hybrid bodies of *the bone people* reveal the permeability of “race” as an experience of tension and grief but not as a marker of the end of indigenous culture. The history of “racial distinction” based on notions of blood and race is fundamental to the novel, and in this chapter I use the term “race” to highlight the way in which colour has been (and still is) used to determine cultural identity in colonial discourses, as well as distinguishing between different cultural groups.⁵ Race within this novel is a contested and dynamic field. I use “Ethnicity” also to capture the specificities of culture that the concept of race may preclude.

the bone people also refuses the trope of “woman as colonised”, and through the body of Kerewin Holmes the “fixity of the gender binary”⁶ is destabilised. Judith Butler theorises that gender is performative, inscribed upon the exterior of the body, and legitimated by discourses of interiority. Furthermore, this “false stabilisation of gender [is] in the interests of heterosexual construction and regulation of sexuality within the reproductive domain”.⁷ It could be argued that it is in the interests of empire also, with a

³ Rod Edmond, “No Country for Towers: reconsidering *the bone people*” *Landfall* 186 Spring (1993), pp. 287–88. Graham Huggan in “Philomela’s Retold Story”, pp. 12–23 and Thomas E. Benediktsson in “The Reawakening of the Gods: realism and the supernatural in Silko and Hulme” *Critique* 33:2 Winter (1992), pp. 121–31, also read *the bone people* as a post-colonial text.

⁴ Rod Edmond, “No country for towers”, p. 281.

⁵ See Houston A. Baker Jr., “Caliban’s Triple Play” *Critical Inquiry* 13 (1986), pp. 182–96; see also Jan Pettman, *Living in the Margins: racism, sexism and feminism* (Sydney: Hampden Press, 1991).

⁶ Helen Gilbert & Joanne Tompkins, *Post-Colonial Drama*, p. 212.

⁷ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 135.

false stabilisation of race as well as gender sustaining narratives of colonisation. It is precisely this destabilising of race and gender in the novel that is provocative and problematic.

the bone people, however, does not destabilise the categories of race and gender to a point where they are no longer useful tools of analysis. This is a novel about hybridity, the permeability of both race and gender, but it is also about Maori, and destabilising race beyond the constructs of colonial narratives ultimately, as outlined in chapter one, “may contradict the aspirations of those who would mobilise around common, if contingent, identities.”⁸

This chapter focuses upon the outsized body of Kerewin Holmes and the way she transgresses gender and race boundaries within a post-colonial New Zealand society. Within *the bone people* gender is a site of contestation as is race, and the body of the novel’s major character, Kerewin Holmes, reveals the problems of essentialist binary definitions of Woman/Man and Maori/Pakeha. Despite these complexities of gender and race Kerewin is ultimately affirmed in her identity as a Maori woman within the framework of contemporary New Zealand society.

Kerewin, a modern day artist hermit, lives in a tower on the edge of a small town, Whangaroa, in the South Island of New Zealand. The order and isolation of her home is shattered one day by a delinquent explorer — Simon Gillayley. The boy draws Kerewin and father Joe together, and the three forge a close relationship based in part on their shared suffering and sense of alienation.

Joe and the mute Simon live in Whangaroa, in a home with

[a] neat lawn bordered by concrete paths. No flowers. No shrubs. The places where a garden had been were filled with pink gravel.

⁸ Monique Deveaux, “Feminism and Empowerment”, p. 237. For a discussion on “race” and the politics of authenticity see Houston A. Baker Jr. “Caliban’s Triple Play”.

The hallway was dim, an unshaded bulb dangling from the ceiling, no carpet. There was not a suspicion of dust anywhere, nor any sign of flowers.⁹

The juxtaposition of the eclectic and ornamented tower with the bare house alludes both to the mental states of the occupants, and the differences between Kerewin and Joe. The homes also signify the extent to which both Kerewin and Joe inhabit marginal spaces within a Pakeha, capitalist world. The tower, a materialisation of Pakeha (and European) fairy stories and histories, is excessive in design and content in comparison with “normal” New Zealand housing. The bare house, by contrast, is an incomplete and shabby version of the New Zealand tradition of home and quarter-acre section. These places are the sites where much of the action of the novel takes place.

Child abuse, alcoholism, and spiritual torment are but three of the many themes within this novel, shaped and expressed through terrible violence. The three main characters, too, are shocking: Simon, for his battered and tortured body, and his faithful love; Joe because he is a beautiful, loving man who violently abuses a child; and Kerewin, because she disrupts all expectation.

Kerewin is the most solid and imposing character of the three, with the narration often echoing her speech and thought patterns. She expands beyond the confines of the heroine, and resists any attempt to reduce her to the patriarchal feminine through body and action, transgressing sexual and wider cultural expectations. Kerewin says of her sexuality,

ever since I can remember, I've disliked close contact... charged contact, emotional contact, as well as any overtly sexual contact. I veer away from it, because it always feels like the other person is draining something out of me... (pp. 265-66)

⁹ Keri Hulme, *the bone people* (London: Picador/ Pan Books, 1986), p. 76. All further references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

Kerewin is solid yet transparent, as she seems at once to be both female and male, but also strangely neither. Indeed Kerewin says of herself, “ve/ver/vis, I am not his, vis/ve/ver, nor am I for her, ver/vis/ve, a pronoun for me...” (p. 426). She is a third gender “neither horned nor slatted, a twilight of the genders...” (p. 277). She is both extraordinary and inadequate.

One critical response to Kerewin and her body is to label her as androgynous, an apparently non-problematic means of containing that which refuses containment. Thus the subversive potential of Kerewin’s body is subsumed within the category androgyny. The concept of androgyny is, however, problematic. It slips into popular usage as a description of women being like men, rather than a stricter definition of being of both female and male sex. As such, androgyny heralds the andro-femme style of women’s fashion, the “girls will be boys” look, a fashion which, ironically, is fundamentally gender specific.¹⁰

A woman becomes androgynous when she transgresses the expectations of her sex, when she acts in an unfeminine (or even unbecoming) manner. “She” is androgynous, paradoxically, both when her body fits the latest fashion and when it does not. In both ways androgyny is socially utilised to maintain gender distinctions. According to Matra Roberston, “to become female necessitates acceptance of a definition of femininity as the absence of masculinity.”¹¹ The category of androgyny conceals the challenge to cultural constructions of female and maleness, and is the means by which any challenge is ignored. The conflict over the boundaries between male and female can be overlooked as androgyny suggests an “instantiated ‘blurred’ sex”, rather than a substantial body.¹²

¹⁰ Blue jeans are an example of a product that is marketed as unisex yet at the same time have very distinctive, gendered shapes. See Susan Bordo, “Reading the Slender Body” in Mary Jacobus, Evelyn Fox Keller, Sally Shuttleworth (eds), for a discussion of the way androgyny is mobilised as a fashion statement.

¹¹ Matra Robertson, p. 61. Matra Robertson is paraphrasing a Lacanian position here.

¹² I have drawn upon Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interest: cross-dressing and cultural anxiety* (New York: Routledge, 1992), for my understanding of transvestism; see Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interest*, p. 11. For

That the author of *the bone people*, too, has been subjected to sexual scrutiny, reveals the extent to which the character, Kerewin Holmes, is threatening and transgressive. The New Zealand literary canon has been constructed, historically, through sex demarcation and exclusion, and as a result critics have attempted to locate Hulme within gender specific traditions. According to Elizabeth Webby,

[u]nlike the male novelists, however, Hulme does not deal with national politics, wars and revolutions. Instead, she concentrates on the no less bloody and violent, politics of everyday life: relations between the sexes, between races, between parent and child.¹³

And yet for Mark Williams "... several prominent features of her writing are closer to 'masculine' traditions, both local and international, than to feminine ones".¹⁴ The determination of whether Hulme writes as a man or a woman has ramifications for the perception of her text and its political impact, as women's writing has tended to be interpreted as domestic and as less political or literary than the male tradition. As Patrick Evans notes

[t]he historical effect is curious, for while men seemed to be pushing themselves forward into British models of High Culture, women at the same time seemed to bury themselves in the small and the local.¹⁵

more on androgyny see Anne Herrman, "'Passing' Women, Performing Men" in Laurence Goldstein (ed), *The Female Body: figures, styles, speculations* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991), and Virginia Blain, "Cross-dressing in fiction: literary history and the cultural construction of sexuality" in Terry Threadgold & Anne Cranny-Francis (eds), *Feminine Masculine and Representation* (North Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1990).

¹³ Elizabeth Webby, "Keri Hulme Spiralling to Success" *Meanjin* 44:1 March (1985), p. 20.

¹⁴ Mark Williams, *Leaving The Highway: six contemporary New Zealand novelists* (Auckland: Auckland UP, 1990), p. 94.

¹⁵ Patrick Evans, *The Penguin History of New Zealand Literature* (Auckland: Penguin, 1990), p. 82.

This, as Evans argues, has had the effect of marginalising women writers within genres that didn't threaten the heightened reputation of the male writer. Within such a tradition Hulme's ambiguity, then, is a cause of considerable tension.

But nevertheless this novel slips into the greyness of androgyny, for Hulme writes, it would seem, as both a woman and a man. But androgyny, that of the writer or the character, is ultimately unsatisfying. By writing of Kerewin Holmes as an androgynous figure, critics overlook the issue of gender, outlining but not investigating it. To understand Kerewin as substantial, as solid and as present, she must be understood not as an "indistinct moment" but as a cross-dresser — a transvestite. To quote Marjorie Garber:

*transvestism is a space of possibility structuring and confounding culture: the disruptive element that intervenes, not just a category crisis of male and female, but the crisis of category itself.*¹⁶

Transvestism and cross-dressing involve both a literal disruption of gender codes and the provision of a space for new expression. Dominant discourses of masculinity and femininity which prescribe the shape of sexed and socialised male and female bodies are problematised by cross-dressing. Again, according to Garber, "[e]xcess, that which overflows a boundary, is the space of the transvestite."¹⁷ It is to this excess that I look to understand the substance of Kerewin Holmes. It is this transvestism that expands beyond gender containment, and a docile, reduced femininity. I am faced with a gendered language with which to express the transvestite body, and the complexities of transgressing sex. Although problematic, I will continue to refer to Kerewin as "she".

Although she labels herself a "brilliant amateur" (p. 55), Kerewin has a vast array of skills: she fishes, paints, brews alcohol and herbal medicines, speaks Maori and

¹⁶ Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interest*, p. 17. Italics in original.

¹⁷ Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interest*, p. 28.

English (with esoteric aplomb), has studied Akido in Japan, sings, composes, and much more. She is also resourceful, having built her tower home, and then the new marae at Moerangi despite still recovering from severe illness (p. 431).¹⁸ In material terms she has everything, including a windfall lottery win that allows her a life of “independent means”.

Kerewin disrupts the distinctions between hero, heroine, lover, and mother, being all and yet none of these things. She has the strength, and reserve of a hero, but she is also the heroine. There is a dynamic tension between her and Joe Gillayley, but they never become lovers, and the close relationship remains not only unconsummated, but strictly platonic (p. 46). And, although Kerewin offers the child, Simon, affection and support, she initially baulks at the idea of becoming his substitute mother (p. 50). Indeed, Kerewin seems to lack the very characteristics that constitute a maternal figure, if for no other reason than she is too much like a man.

As Garber points out, a common response to transvestite figures is to locate them within either feminine or masculine gender. So it is that Kerewin Holmes is often likened to the “man alone”, a stock character in New Zealand literature. According to one critic Kerewin Holmes has the “familiar features of a New Zealand literary type: the outback, laconic, do-it-yourself bloke with his tall tales and adventures”.¹⁹ For another she is the “new and more sophisticated version of the Godzone ‘man alone’”.²⁰ This estranged figure is, of course, traditionally male and consciously constructed within a specific culture of masculinity, through the exclusion and vilification of women. To a large extent Kerewin does play the “man alone”, seeking isolation and independence, but with one crucial difference — she is not so clearly a man. Moreover, the “man alone” ethos is celebrated within the novel. To overlook the very gender distinction, the very

¹⁸ Marae — courtyard in front of meeting house: Ranginui Walker, *Ka Whawhai Tonu Matou/ Struggle Without End* (Auckland: Penguin, 1990), p. 296.

¹⁹ Mark Williams, *Leaving The Highway*, p. 107.

²⁰ Judith Dale, “the bone people: (not) having it both ways” *Landfall* 39:4 December (1985), p. 414.

masculinised space that is the “man alone”, is to ignore, as Joanna Russ argues, that “[c]hanging the sex of the protagonist completely alters the meaning of the tale”.²¹

It is through the construction of Kerewin as androgynous that the elision of “woman” within an androgynous man is made possible, as it is the indistinct figure that enables critic and reader alike to overlook the fundamental transgression of gendered space. But as a transvestite Kerewin Holmes denies the possibility of elision because it is her very body, that of the woman-man, that holds the ground: “[t]he asphalt sink[ing] beneath her muscled feet” (p. 3). It is the cross-dressing that announces that which was previously ignored, the transgression of gendered discourse and space. Suddenly the bastion of New Zealand maleness is shaken to its very cultural foundations.

Kerewin is read as androgynous because of her size, behaviour and attitude. These characteristics are seen to compromise her femininity and necessarily mean she is partly male, and therefore, androgynous. By contrast, the transvestite image is a means of revealing the ways in which fat female bodies transgress the culturally-constructed bodies of femininity. According to Judith Butler, drag, cross-dressing and butch/femme are means to destabilise the “disciplinary production of gender”;²²

That gender reality is created through sustained social performances means that the very notions of an essential sex and a true or abiding masculinity or femininity are also constituted as part of the strategy that conceals gender’s performative character and the performative possibilities for proliferating gender configurations outside the restricting frames of masculinist domination and compulsory heterosexuality.²³

²¹ Joanna Russ, “What Can A Heroine Do? Or Why Women Can’t Write” in Susan Koppelman Cornillon (ed), *Images of Women in Fiction: feminist perspectives* (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1972), p. 6.

²² Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 135.

²³ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 141.

Within *the bone people* cross-dressing is female to male, and incorporates three distinct types of transvestism which I use to structure this chapter: that of physical-bodily cross-dressing, a transvestism of social space, and an ethnic-racial cross-dressing. I address each category in order, beginning with Kerewin's physical cross-dressing.

Kerewin is solid and substantial; she is fat. She cross-dresses at a physical level as well as the accessories that adorn it. She describes herself as,

[h]eavy shouldered, heavy-hammed, heavy-haired.

No evidence of a brain behind those short brows.

Yellowed eyes, and eczema scarred skin.

Large hands and large feet, crooked only if you look closely... A right piratical-looking eschewball I suppose I look, but what the hell. (p. 21)

She is the same height as Joe, and has a "stone grey blue gaze" (p. 54). Thus the dominant discourse that ascribes certain characteristics to women via a socially-constructed femininity is transgressed, and reshaped. Kerewin's very body is outside the form of the feminine, as she grows beyond the parameters of the female body.

Her hands are large and are adorned with a "knuckleduster collection" of semi-precious stones and precious metals. These rings that sit prominently upon her fingers are a parody of feminine jewellery, and as such the very antithesis of delicate decorous rings, being powerful, fetishised and virile:

...[h]er left hand is studded by four silverset cabochons of greenstone, and there's a star sapphire with three dolphins circling it deiseal [sic] in gold on her right hand. The massive gold signet she always wears is on her right middle finger... (pp. 243-44)

The rings signal her strength and threat, and intensify the power of her hands. These are the hands that hit Simon, and conquered Joe, and are so often clenched in fists, or swiftly catching flies to intimidate abusive hotel patrons. These hands transgress gender boundaries, and call into question Kerewin's femininity, announcing agility and strength, rather than a gendered docility, frequently demonstrated most graphically through painted manicured nails. Her long fingered hands, flaccid after her illness — "For some time they had been infected... she hid them in gloves... Swollen, empurpled, leaking pus from every crack" (pp. 418-19) — are bodily expressions of her cross-dressing.

As well as initially appearing uncontained by a docile feminine form, Kerewin's body goes through several transformations throughout the novel, from weighty to skeletal, from masculine to asexual, to sexualised feminine as she constantly crosses gender boundaries. Her body size and weight set her apart from other women, especially because she does not undertake diets or seem to suffer the desire for the perfect figure. Early on in the novel Kerewin evaluates herself as "thick and unfit and getting fatter day by day. But what the hell..." (p. 15). In a mood of self-recrimination she says, "I'm there all right, little piggy eyes in a large piggy face, swivelling down all your lazyguttled blubberarsed length..." (p. 289). Later, after she has recovered from a near fatal illness, she writes, "...I'm putting fat back on with devotion, eating as though my life depended upon it. I'm nine and a half stone, rising ten..." (p. 431). Appetite is celebrated, and pounds are a measure of well-being. By comparison, her emaciation during the illness is figured as grotesque:

The great muscles gather and stretch under my foul hide, feeling
a way out. Slack belly... folds of flab, but better than deadly
mounds... and breasts dangling, not in the natural aging curve
though. All the fat flesh has melted and left bare gland in a flap
of skin. (p. 425)

The irony is, of course, that for contemporary women the emaciated body is the celebrated body, the fashionable body, and fat is the enemy. Kerewin compares her body before and after her illness, and finds her reduced size uncomfortable: "The fat cover she

had sneered at, that lapped her body in protective covering, had vanished. The muscles of her arms were grotesquely exposed" (p. 418). As a result she sets about regaining stature and solidity.

The clothes Kerewin wears intensify her appearance of solidity and non-femininity, as she is most often attired in a silk shirt, leather jerkin, denim jacket and jeans (p. 413). When she meets Simon for the first time she is also wearing a "knife at side, [and is] bare footed... A right piratical-looking eschewball" (p. 21). The way of adorning her substantial body results in many characters confusing her sex. When Simon first stays at the tower, awaiting retrieval after trespassing, he repeats to himself, "[s]he saw I am cold" (p. 41). Yet later it is repeated to Kerewin that Simon "wasn't sure whether [she was a] man or woman" until Piri, Joe's cousin said, "you seemed a nice sort of person. A lady..." (p. 48). Here Kerewin's cross-dressing appears to extend beyond sex/gender to class, from woman to lady.

Other characters are confused by Kerewin also. The deep sea diver who Kerewin commissions to salvage the mystery wreck that Simon had survived at first thought Kerewin was male, but after her failed attempt to maintain a "basso profundo" he realised she "wasn't male under the denim and leather and silk" (p. 433). Yet he still questions her femininity: "Never thought a woman could use a hammer like that... don't tell me you're a carpenter by trade?" (p. 433).

Joe's perception of Kerewin's body fluctuates throughout the novel too. He describes her on the beach at Moerangi, where they are on holiday as,

[a] strange person in blue denims, sometimes obscured by the mist from the waves that explode like geysers in the blowhole. She looks tense and desperately unhappy. Like she's at war with herself. Like a sword wearing itself out on its sheath. She doesn't look like a woman at all. Hard and taut, someone of the past or future, an androgyne... Still as a rock herself. (p. 187)

Mirrored by a threatening and multi-sexualised landscape, Joe cannot understand Kerewin as feminine, so he labels her androgynous. Her hardness is confirmed a few pages later, when Kerewin and Joe fight, and Kerewin is the victor.

After they return to Whangaroa Joe, rather ironically, proposes marriage to Kerewin (p. 262). It is a proposal which she rejects. But Joe remains hopeful:

Ah God, sweet Jesus, look at her... leanwristed, leanankled, but strong thickhipped body, ripe for bearing children no matter what she says... Lord, I could have more children by her... narrow waist I could put my hands around.(p. 295)

Although he acknowledges her strength, he attempts to reduce her body (the lean ankle and the narrow waist), and present her as a vessel for his ambition. This contrasts with the earlier description, revealing the way in which masculinity and femininity are understood. It is part of Joe's spiritual journey that he relinquishes this passive, insubstantial construction of her:

Kerewin... I was trying to make her fit my idea of what a friend, a partner was. I could see only the one way... whatever she thought she was, bend her to the idea that lovers are, marriage is, the only sanity. Don't accept merely what she can offer, make her give and take more... now I can see other possibilities, other ways, and there is still a hope... (p. 381) ²⁴

The fact that Kerewin survives an attack on her body by a mysterious "stomach growth" is perhaps the most striking aspect of her physical cross-dressing and corporeal transgression. The tumour announces itself with a vengeance when Kerewin strikes out at Joe on the beach at Moerangi. Although it is never named, it seems to be a cancer. She

²⁴ For an analysis of *the bone people* that focuses on love, happiness and transformation using a psychoanalytical perspective, particularly Julia Kristeva, *Tales of Love*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (Columbia UP: New York, 1987), see Anna Smith, "Keri Hulme and 'Love's Wounded Beings'" in Mark Williams & Michele Leggott (eds), *Opening The Book: new essays on New Zealand writing* (Auckland: Auckland UP, 1995), pp. 140–61.

describes the pain as similar to, “a period cramp, or the aftermath to a blow to the stomach” (p. 187). Susan Sontag writes about the social and literary meanings of illness, saying of cancer that it is “a demonic pregnancy” and that it is popularly associated with insufficient passion and sexual repression.²⁵ The location and character of Kerewin’s illness suggests that she is being physically punished for her moral failings.

Kerewin prepares for her death, hoarding pain-killers and alcohol and retreats to an isolated hut, but at the point of death she is aided by a mysterious stranger, “a thin wiry person of indeterminate age. Of indeterminate sex. Of indeterminate race” (p. 424). This visitor remains curiously insubstantial, hovering somewhere between spiritual and physical existence. Whether this is the ghostly presence of an old-time Maori, a momentary visit by a disfigured vagrant, or something other, is left open. Nevertheless, this figure is the vehicle for Kerewin’s spiritual healing.

Kerewin’s miraculous recovery is not, however, predicated upon the feminising or destruction of her body as is the case with so many literary heroines, although she does undergo a moral journey, paying for her abuse and abandonment of Simon.²⁶ Not only does Kerewin survive the tumour, but she also regains her weight and she does not form a sexual relationship with Joe. She has a significant spiritual experience, seriously re-evaluates her life, and remains undiminished at the end of the novel. Unlike Sweetie, Kerewin does not die.²⁷ Furthermore, if as Sontag says “Cancer cells ‘colonize’ from the

²⁵ Susan Sontag, *Illness as a Metaphor*, p. 6 and p. 21. respectively.

²⁶ In Daphne Du Maurier’s *Rebecca* (London: Gollancz, 1939), for example, the character Rebecca has uterine cancer arguably as both a punishment and as a physical expression of her infidelity.

²⁷ Gay Wilentz is critical of Mark William’s scepticism towards the Maori religious beliefs and “semi magical cures for cancer”, arguing that “[t]o comprehend this novel of healing in its fullest sense, the reader must be able to accept the alternative reality put forth through Hulme’s feminist revisioning of Maori culture and traditional medicine”. For Gay Wilentz *the bone people* charts the holistic process of healing that is integral to Maori culture. Thus the “miraculous” recovery from cancer is in keeping with Maori techniques and concepts of healing. Gay Wilentz, “Instruments of Change: healing cultural dis-ease in Keri Hulme’s *the bone people*” *Literature and Medicine* 14:1 (1995), p. 127. Thomas E. Benediktsson argues that *the bone people* is representative of a broader literary pattern where “attempts to reconcile

original tumor to far sites in the body”, Kerewin’s body turns external political and cultural colonisation into an internal expression of illness.²⁸ Her body is being physically colonised. In this context her recovery is even more significant as she vanquishes the coloniser.

As well as cross-dressing physically, Kerewin also cross-dresses socially. That is, she transgresses gendered social space. Kerewin has a level of wealth rare for women, and her ability to pay for herself, as well as others, threatens the small town and Joe. There is an ongoing ambivalence towards the various signs of Pakeha masculine achievement, and an ironic consciousness about the extent to which possessing materialistic virility remains unfulfilling. Although Kerewin designed and built her tower home with the assistance of paid labour, it is not her desired haven but rather a prison; Kerewin is “encompassed by a wall, high and hard and stone, with only [her] brainy nails to tear it down” (p. 7).

Similarly, Kerewin’s pursuit of material goods is ultimately unsatisfying. She has, for example, not one but two fishing boats. The size and excess of the Whangaroa craft, a “36 foot converted fishing trawler” (fitted out with an impressive array of gadgetry including a depth sounder and an electronic compass) suggests a transgression of gendered social space that borders on parody as again Kerewin cross-dresses into a male world. Kerewin describes the vessel, taken out on only three fishing trips, as “a plaything among playthings in plenty” (p. 207). In the same way that Kerewin cross-dresses from female dependence to male independence, she cross-dresses from working-class gambling (buying lottery tickets) to moneyed self-sufficiency.²⁹

realism with the supernatural in the contemporary postcolonial novel are undertaken in an effort to undermine the ideological base that supports realism”: “The Reawakening of the Gods”, p. 121.

²⁸ Susan Sontag, *Illness as a Metaphor*, p. 64.

²⁹ I am using a strand of Marxism that maintains the distinction between independent capital and the working-class, to highlight the fundamental difference of access to financial (and other) power that independent capital entails. Within this paradigm the middle-class is understood to be contained within the working-class insofar as wage and salary earners do not generally have access to capital. The point here is

Her drinking habits are also a site of female to male cross-dressing. She drinks alone frequently, which is, perhaps, a sign of alcoholism rather than gendered behaviour, yet also frequents bars on her own. Kerewin's drinking is an example where class and cultural elements can produce contradictory readings. These drinking habits cast her, in Pakeha New Zealand terms, as an immoral woman because traditionally, as Cathy Bonwell argues, the middle-class "antithesis of the Pakeha 'good woman' was the woman who drank publicly in hotels with men", and "[s]ocial disapproval is strong against women who get drunk".³⁰

The public bar is a bastion of working-class maleness, and drinking at the pub, as Jock Phillips argues, has become "a central test of male identity for many New Zealand men".³¹ That Kerewin frequents this space further demonstrates the extent of her transgression of gender and class. She is neither a prostitute nor a barmaid, and drinks in the bar *as a man*. This is, however, a cultural as well as a gender/class specific observation; Maori women have crossed traditional Pakeha sex boundaries, drinking more freely in mixed company, and in pubs.³²

not to posit an argument that categorically removes the middle-class from any analysis, but rather to focus attention on two key factors. Firstly the intensive culture of working-class gambling is highly visible within the off-course betting, starting price betting (known in Australia as SP betting) and later government organised gambling such as Totaliser Agency Board (TAB) as well as state lotteries, where winning is potentially financially transformative as opposed to the "high cultural" gambling of the wealthy in sites like casinos where a win or loss is merely gratifying or unfortunate. Secondly this argument highlights the link between Maori economic positions within the New Zealand context and that of the working-class. Although there may be individual examples that fall outside of my framework the point here is not to offer a detailed analysis of the class politics of gambling and capital, but rather to place Kerewin within a political context that attaches considerable meaning to the marked change in her financial position.

³⁰ Cathy Banwell, "I'm Not a Drinker Really: women and alcohol" in Julie Park (ed), *Ladies A Plate: change and continuity in the lives of New Zealand women* (Auckland: Auckland UP, 1991), p. 175 and p. 177.

³¹ Jock Phillips, *A Man's Country?: the image of the Pakeha male — a history* (Auckland: Penguin, 1987), p. 78.

³² Cathy Banwell, "I'm Not a Drinker Really" in Julie Park (ed), p. 204.

Racial-ethnic cross-dressing is the third form of transgression looked at in this chapter. The diversity of responses to the character, Kerewin Holmes, is not restricted to her sexuality but also includes her “racial” identification. This also extends to debate over the racial identity of the author. In attempting to define Hulme as a non-Maori writer, and thereby undermine the character of Kerewin, C.K. Stead wrote that Hulme’s “uses of Maori language and mythology strike me as willed, self-conscious, not inevitable, not entirely authentic”.³³ Stead has been answered, most cogently by Margery Fee, who problematises his appeal to authenticity. Fee points out that “Hulme’s definition of Maori is far more liberal than... Stead’s”.³⁴ But others have also criticised the novel for its implausibility. Carmel Gaffney argues that Hulme “fails to convince the reader that Kerewin’s instant integration with her Maori past has an important function in the novel’s structure.”³⁵

Other critics have celebrated *the bone people* for its apparent vision of a future harmonious, bicultural New Zealand. The combining of Maori and Pakeha spiritual and material elements seem to offer cultural legitimacy for settler peoples. Terry Goldie argues that

[i]n their need to become “native,” to belong here, whites in Canada, New Zealand, and Australia have adopted a process which I have termed “indigenization.” A peculiar word, it suggests the impossible necessity of becoming indigenous.³⁶

It is this indigenisation, the appropriation of “nativism” that troubles Ruth Brown. Brown warns against a Pakeha appropriation of Maori spiritualism, pointing out the tendency for “‘Maori spiritualism’ [to become] a sentimentalised perversion of English Romanticism in

³³ C. K. Stead, *Answering to the Language*, p. 180.

³⁴ Margery Fee, “Why C.K. Stead Didn’t Like Keri Hulme’s *the bone people*”, p. 18.

³⁵ Carmel Gaffney, “Making the Net Whole: design in Keri Hulme’s *The Bone People*” *Southerly* 46 (1986), p. 297.

³⁶ Terry Goldie, *Fear and Temptation*, p. 13.

ethnic dress".³⁷ Rather, like the attempts to position Hulme as either a male or female writer, the desire to determine her ethnicity and the culture within the novel categorically, reveals the containing nature of the definitions themselves.³⁸

Kerewin's racial cross-dressing, like that of her sexual cross-dressing, is at the levels of body and social space. That she simultaneously occupies several spaces suggests the extent to which transgression of one cultural code involves adherence to another. As Gilbert and Tompkins argue

the perceived (constructed) binary categories of male/female and white/black are never merely biologically determined but are also historically and ideologically conditioned. Moreover... race and gender are distinct, albeit sometimes intersecting and/or overlapping, factors which cannot be collapsed under the conceptual umbrella of marginalisation.³⁹

In Pakeha terms Kerewin's transgression is enormous: she is unfeminine, non-sexual, and verbally and physically threatening. Yet in Maori terms she can be read somewhat differently. Unlike Joe, who is dark skinned, Kerewin is "blue-eyed, brown-haired and mushroom pale" (p. 61). Kerewin's body looks white, and this alone is thought, by some, to problematise any claim to Maoriness. Although "only" one-eighth Maori she formerly felt all Maori, but "[n]ow it feels like the best part of me has got lost in the way I live" (p. 62). She is like the Maori of the kaumatua's past (the elder who acts as spiritual guide for Joe) those who "were husks, aping the European manners and customs. Maori on the outside, with none of the heart left" (p. 359). Just as Kerewin looks Pakeha so she lives Pakeha, but the white culture is a series of prisons: the tower, the penitentiary, the factory. Hope for Kerewin lies instead with Maori culture.

³⁷ Ruth Brown, "Maori Spirituality as Pakeha Construct" *Meanjin* 48:2 Winter (1989), p. 253.

³⁸ See chapter seven for a discussion of this aspect of the critical response.

³⁹ Helen Gilbert & Joanne Tompkins, *Post-Colonial Drama*, p. 205.

The primary way in which the novel evades containing binary oppositions is through the identification of Kerewin with both recent and ancient Maori history. This is a novel of the past and of the present. The triangle at the heart of the novel, Kerewin, Joe, and Simon, actualised by the clay tricephalos of their intertwined heads, echoes the very basis of Maori history, and the tripartite sequence of myths that shape Maori culture. According to the history there were three-stages of existence: To Kore, the void before life, Te Po, the dark where two entwined Gods begat the others, and Te Aorarama, the world of light in which humanity grew.⁴⁰

Not only is Kerewin situated within a Maori past but she occupies a specific gendered space within that history. The landscape in *the bone people* is highly feminised although this is often overlooked in favour of the more overt and masculine spiritual aspects of the novel (especially Joe's spiritual redemption). Papatuanuku, the earth mother of Maori history, is more than a passive feminised land metaphor, a mother nature constructed as the empty space awaiting "penetration" by the colonising man. Rather she is a physical and substantial presence; woman occupies space, and it is from this land that Kerewin receives her ultimate comfort and strength:

...a great warmth flows into her. Up from the earth under her feet into the pit of her belly, coursing up like benevolent fire through her breast to the crown of her head. (p. 430)

As well as existing within this female Maori landscape, Kerewin is also identified with three other Maori women. Moreover, each woman echoes the other in physical aspect, skills or social role. The women with whom Kerewin is compared are Hana, who was married to Joe, the kaumatua's grandmother and Joe's grandmother. It is the link between these women and their space within the Maori historical frame that reveals the extent to which this is a Maori novel about Maori culture, rather than a racially

⁴⁰ R.J. Walker, "Maori Identity" in David Novitz & Bill Wilmott (eds), *Culture and Identity in New Zealand* (Wellington: GP Books, 1989), p. 36.

androgynous novel, and a way for Pakeha to become like Maori.⁴¹ Although Kerewin never meets these women, her life is affected by them, and to some extent they all exist within her. Kerewin's relationship to these women, and the way in which her body can be read as Maori, warrants closer scrutiny.

Kerewin and Hana are linked primarily through their relationships to Joe and Simon. Hana, a vastly different person to Kerewin, occupied an unambiguously female, gendered space, being a nurse (a traditional female vocation) and new mother, making explicit her caring maternal role. In a heavily ironic reference to Maori deaths due to the presence of European colonists, Hana and her infant son are said to have died of influenza.⁴² Hana implored Joe to keep Simon, after he had washed up on the beach, and to, "[l]ook after our child..." (p. 353), after her death.

But Hana is not confined to the position of romanticised, (deceased) mother and wife, as she actively intervenes in Joe's consciousness when he undergoes his spiritual retreat. Joe has a nightmare where he is breast fed by Hana only to find himself suckling on an enormous moth.

He looks down at Hana, who lies on her back smiling up at him, her face relaxed and full of joy. The stream flows from her vagina in a steady pure rivulet... "Well Joe my love, you'd better feed first then." Her breasts before him are still swollen with milk. The milk is sweeter than the riverwater... To his horror, he discovers he is sucking the fat furred end of an enormous moth.
(p. 351)

⁴¹ See Ruth Brown, "Maori Spirituality" for a discussion of the ramifications of appropriation of indigenous spiritualism by non-indigenous groups. Dominant discourses consistently recuperate and de-politicise issues that transgress their boundaries, and to this extent this novel is de-politicised by readings which privilege a universal New Zealand over specific Maori issues.

⁴² As historian Michael King notes, "[t]he last major epidemic was the influenza pandemic of 1918, in which at least 2,160 Maori died, at seven times the European death rate", Michael King, "Between Two Worlds" in Geoffrey W. Rice (ed), *The Oxford History of New Zealand second edition* (Auckland: Oxford UP, 1992), p. 287.

The moth, according to the kaumatua, represents the soul, the dream suggesting a symbolic relationship between women, food and death. Interestingly, Kerewin is visited by a moth, “a gravid female, plump banded body ripe with eggs” when she is seriously ill (p. 421).

Joe’s dream of Hana takes on greater significance when it is read alongside his other dreams of her, where “[s]ometimes she eats one of my sons and then starts on me, beginning at my privates” (p. 354). These images have a specific cultural resonance, evoking the image of Hine-nui-te-Po (the great lady of the night).⁴³ Hine-nui-te-Po is an agent of death, and the mother waiting in the realm of darkness to greet her children as they journey through death. This mythological figure, with vaginal teeth of obsidian, embodies mortality, as well as threatening emasculation. The passage of life becomes the emblem of death. Hana is, then, the mother-death figure of the novel. Although the male horror of castration and fear of the mother is part of the colonial heritage, Joe’s dreams are best understood in the context of this specific Maori framework.

It would seem that Joe is right to be fearful about his privates, however. Just as Hana nibbled them in his dreams, so Kerewin gobbles little penis sandwiches at the pub. Although Joe and his family are eating them as well, it is Kerewin who makes the analogy: “[a] lot of baby cockles with their siphons erect like tiny penises...” (p. 285). Kerewin’s observation symbolically aligns her with both Hana and Hine-nui-te-Po.

Nevertheless, from the outset Kerewin is hesitant to take on the maternal role left vacant by Hana, just as she refuses the patriarchally-defined heterosexual feminine body. Although she recoils at Joe’s implicit suggestion that she could provide “a woman’s care”

⁴³ According to “legend” this woman started life as Hine-titima (the dawn maid) who was the child of Tane, the god off-spring of Papatuanuku and Ranginui, and Hine-ahu-one the first woman, fashioned from the earth. She “married” Tane and had several children before discovering that he was her father. Angry and ashamed she told Tane that he must care for their children in life and she would go to the underworld and look after them in death. This she did, and became Hine-nui-te-Po. For two examples of the differing emphases that can be placed on the interpretation of cultural “myths” and history see Patricia Grace and Robyn Kahukiwa, *Wahine Toa* (Auckland: Collins, 1984) and Cleve Barlow, *Tikanga Whakaaro: key concepts in Maori culture* (Auckland & Oxford: Oxford UP, 1991), for a more conservative presentation of Maori mythology.

for the aberrant Simon — “Has he got some strange hope I’m going to be that kid’s substitute mother? Bloody oath...” (p. 50) — and refuses Joe’s sexual advances, she does assume a parental role for the boy. At the end of the novel Kerewin adopts Simon and formalises her relationship with Joe. Nevertheless, the three characters remain outside of conventional Pakeha, heterosexual familial arrangements.

Kerewin is also a cook, providing Simon and Joe with many sumptuous meals.⁴⁴ Her meals are delectable if eccentric, ranging from flounder, to wood pigeons. Even breakfast is described in delicious detail, enabling vicarious enjoyment of the food:

She made a thick oatmeal porridge that bubbled and klopped like a waking mud pool; fried half a loop of black pudding and two onions and several eggs in butter; made coffee and toast with quick careless efficiency... (pp. 38–39)

But even though Kerewin’s meals are eccentric her cooking is also an expression of her female identity. Within the New Zealand context there is a strong traditional association of women and food, from procurement to presentation.⁴⁵ As the female provider of food, then, Kerewin is aligned with Hana.

The second of the three women that Kerewin is identified with is the kaumatua’s grandmother. This is the woman who is responsible for the whole spiritual vision within *the bone people*. She foresaw the need to have protectors of the mauriora — the “Life principle, thymos of humans; talisman or material symbol of that secret and mysterious principle protecting the mana (power/vitality) of people, birds, land, forests whatever”. (p. 449) — and the arrival of the digger, broken man or stranger to take over the role of caretaker of the essence of Maori culture. She, like Hine-nui-te-Po, is formidable and awful, and is described in similar terms to Kerewin:

⁴⁴ Joe cooks, also, but not with the same aplomb as Kerewin. It can be argued that Joe is attempting to fulfil both the role of mother and father after Hana’s death, and his provision of the meals marks his attempt to straddle the roles of “breadwinner” and food maker.

⁴⁵ Phyllis Herda, “Ladies a Plate” in Juile Park (ed), p. 144.

[s]he didn't wear shoes, and her feet had soles as hard as leather. She was tall... and heavy with muscle and fat. A big woman, a very big woman... she had a disease in her private parts, and her smell was offensive. (p. 359)

Kerewin's version of the disease in her private parts is the mysterious stomach-ovarian growth.

Like Hana, the kaumatua's grandmother had controlling influence beyond the grave, inspiring a deep respect and anger. She too, spoke through dreams and incarnations. The kaumatua can hear her mocking laugh and rails against her:

you, cackling away there in the back of my mind — o yes! I heard you start when I told him those things you made me do so long ago, for it was your idea of a joke, nei? — very soon I will be in the back of my mind with you, and the thought does not increase my respect... indeed, my hands are knotting with rage, old woman. Watch out! There is not long to go now! (p. 355)

The old woman who inspires such anger was also a driving force behind the maintenance of the culture, her grandson forced to devote his life to waiting for the broken man, Joe, to arrive. In a dream the kaumatua's grandmother speaks to him about the final arrival of the figure for whom he had waited all his adult life:

"I wasn't feeble-minded, I did not speak of illusions before I died," she said acidly. "It was the way things had to be done. The waiting was as much for your good as for that which you watch over. It is finished now." (p. 338)

It seems that as with Kerewin, it is the woman who holds the culture together, moving it on, testing the boundaries, but making sure essential elements are not forgotten, that bonds are not broken. This is the role that Kerewin assumes with regard to Joe and Simon, her whanau and iwi.

The third figure, Joe's grandmother, is as fearsome as the kaumatua's grandmother. Joe says of her, "oowee, was that old lady strongwilled! What she wanted, she got, me or anything else... my Nana wasn't one for letting kids take it easy" (p. 227). This woman fostered Joe when he was three, and during his childhood cured him of polio through her own herbal knowledge "[a]s far as she was concerned, the old ways and the old treatments were best, even for new diseases..." (p. 228). Joe tells Kerewin,

the old lady got me walking again. I think she did that by sheer
willpower... I want you to walk, and by God you're going to
walk, polio or no polio. Walk! And here I am, walking. (p. 229)

Kerewin shares this knowledge of herbs, making various mixtures for ailments from menstrual cramps to car-sickness (p. 161), and it is this knowledge that links Kerewin to the past, to the old women who in turn link back to ancestral figures. As Gay Wilentz writes, "[t]he pivotal relationship between cultural awareness and personal well-being is integral to Maori healing — and often falls within the domain of traditional woman healers."⁴⁶

Kerewin's body and space, then, connect her with the land, and sexes her as female in Maori terms. She is, however, a woman in a substantially different sense to that represented in the dominant Pakeha discourse. Instead of being defined by absence and reduction, she is heavy and takes up considerable space. She is solid and sure upon the earth, a transgressive body that ultimately remains beyond the constraints of hegemonic, colonialist discourses. The fatness that is seen to compromise her femininity in Pakeha culture is the very form that asserts it in Maori culture. Fatness, then, is shown to be a cultural construct with the female body taking on differing shapes and meanings in different cultural contexts.

When Kerewin stands upon the beach at Moerangi "on the orange shingle, arms akimbo, drinking the beach in, absorbing sea and spindrift, breathing it into her dusty

⁴⁶ Gay Wilentz, "Instruments of Change", p. 129.

memory" (p. 163), she is solid and sure upon the earth, a transgressive body that ultimately remains beyond the constraints of hegemonic discourses.

When she calls to Papatuanuku —

What do I love?... Very little. The earth. The stars. The sea...

Any colour under the sun or hidden deep in the breast of my
mother Earth. Ah Papa my love, what joys do you yet conceal?

(p. 423)

— Kerewin positions herself within a Maori landscape, and is a Maori woman.

It is clear, then, that the various forms of cross-dressing, body, social and racial, intertwine as Kerewin refuses containment. The plot movement in the novel is towards a re-connection with a Maori way of life, achieved through violence and revelation. Kerewin's journey is a spiritual one, not merely towards a utopian, truly bicultural, society but towards a re-affirmation of her Maori culture. By the end of the novel Kerewin is within her family, is united with Joe and Simon, and has transformed her phallic tower into a spiral enclosure.

Kerewin reaffirms her Maori-ness and female-ness while still occupying a transgressive space in Pakeha terms. The shift from the individual to the collective has been criticised, rejected as clumsy or unconvincing, but it is a hesitancy to acknowledge the Maori culture of the entire novel that allows this criticism. A reading of the novel that privileges androgyny obscures transgression and depoliticises the novel, and conversely reveals the extent to which normality is culturally determined and located in the body. By offering a reading of Kerewin as a cross-dresser it is possible to avoid the containment of sexual, racial and spatial dualisms, and realise the transgressive transvestite space. Thus the body that was produced as evidence of her androgyny and lack of femininity, is revealed to be the product of culturally specific inscription. Fatness allows Kerewin to disrupt the boundaries of Pakeha femininity while asserting a Maori identity.

Chapter Five

“A lady glides”: *Lilian's Story* and the classed body

Kate Grenville's first published novel, the 1984 *Australian-Vogel* Award winning *Lilian's Story* (1985), traces the life of Lilian Singer who was born on “a wild night in the year of federation”, and who was destined for greatness.¹ The novel follows Lilian from a childhood living in the Singer home of “Rosecroft” on the Sydney water front, through a troubled adolescence and adulthood (lived within the confines of a mental asylum), to her time as an elderly woman, living on the streets of Kings Cross, Sydney. Lilian's life is characterised by a struggle to assert herself in a world not ready for an expansive, passionate woman.

The character of Lilian Singer is modelled on Sydney eccentric, Bee Miles, who gained notoriety in later life by hijacking taxis and by quoting Shakespeare to captive audiences.² Grenville, however, stated in an interview with Jennifer Elison that “I wasn't writing a biography of her, just using her as a starting point, a springboard.”³ Of her one brush with Bee Miles, Grenville has said, “I was such an inhibited little middle-class girl that the sight of this enormous, fat, sweating, loud woman in the middle of the street just shrivelled my soul.”⁴ It is this challenge to middle-class expectations that is embodied by the character, Lilian Singer, as she expands beyond the bounds of prescribed femininity. From the life of Bee Miles, “a brilliant student and a beautiful young woman... [who] had

¹Kate Grenville, *Lilian's Story* (revised Edition) (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1991), p. 3. All further references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

² Where most critics spell Bee Miles's name “Bea”, Ms Miles herself argued that the correct abbreviated spelling of her name was “Bee”. See for example Kevin Sadlier, “Bee's Story” *The Australian Magazine* 27–28 April 1996, pp. 36–39.

³ Jennifer Elison, *Rooms of Their Own* (Ringwood, Victoria: Penguin, 1986), p. 159.

⁴ Jennifer Elison, *Rooms of Their Own*, p. 159.

‘somehow ended up this rather sad street person’, Grenville has woven a story of grief and survival, told with lyrical compassion.⁵

Lilian, with her huge body, is an overwhelming character but her fatness stems from a basic need to assert her existence. When just newly-born Lilian slipped to the ground from her shocked and inert mother’s breast, and spent the rest of her life fighting for her place in the world (p. 3). Pitied by the maid, Alma, Lilian is plied with anything from pikelets and cake to cold potato in an attempt to make up for her bereft and isolated childhood. By contrast, Lilian’s mother, Norah, used an ever replenished supply of chocolates as a means to secure Lilian’s silence and absence.

As is the film *Sweetie*, food and meal times are rich subjects for Grenville, and throughout the novel much of the action centers around rituals of eating. As well as Lilian’s eating habits and the use of food by Norah and Alma, Lilian’s father, Albion, uses family meal times as the occasion to berate and harass his family across the dining room table. His constant barrage provokes differing responses from the other family members. Norah loses her appetite, Lilian’s brother, the second-born John, eats only raw vegetables, retreating behind a wall of crunching, while Lilian eats everything.

Albion’s abuse is not limited to verbal violence, however, and it is in part an attempt to protect herself from Albion that leads to Lilian becoming “a fat girl” (p. 18), finding security and identity in an out-sized body:

I could hold two or three other girls shrilling in the air on the other end of the see-saw. I had grown big and could knock people down if I took a run at them, and block doorways, and there was too much flesh now for Father. (p. 19)

It is this fat body, the physical expression of her defence and personality, that is mobilised as the physical evidence, not merely of her difference, but of her deviance.

As Lilian grows and ages the social meanings of her body change. Lilian Singer never fits, she is too big for her school uniform, too big for her silk party dresses with

⁵ Jennifer Elison, *Rooms of Their Own*, p. 159.

their decorative sashes, and too big for white middle-class femininity. Whilst the rough and tumble activities of her early childhood could be understood (or contained) as characteristic of a tomboy, by the time she reaches adolescence her scarred legs and ripped fingernails are barely tolerated, her transgression of middle-class femininity too obvious to overlook. Lilian transgresses not only gender expectations but reveals the extent to which these expectations are class based.

Lilian's body becomes more and more distant from the middle-class ideal as she struggles to maintain her identity in the face of increasingly vitriolic abuse. Her transgression of a middle-class body becomes the vehicle for her oppression, as her body is defined as other. Finally, when her eccentricity can no longer be contained within the family she is committed to a mental institution by Albion. Although within this institution Lilian's social marginalisation is made official, and her body is affirmed non-middle-class and other, she is also able to find a means to assert her identity. When she is released Lilian is able to impose her expansive self upon the world.

In this chapter I argue that Lilian's body is positioned within a class discourse that distances her from middle-class normality, and provides the rhetorical justification of her subjugation and oppression. Firstly I look at Lilian's body and transgression, as well as her association with marginalised characters. Then I outline how her gender transgression is classed, and the way she is categorised as non-middle-class. Finally I look at the outcomes for Lilian in comparison with the women who adhered to middle-class, patriarchal femininity.

Lilian's Story has been well received by reviewers and critics, being understood as a feminist text about the life of an oppressed and marginalised individual.⁶ Critical

⁶ Pam Gilbert in *Coming Out From Under: contemporary Australian women writers* (London, Sydney, Wellington: Pandora Press, 1988) suggests that Grenville has "achieved a coup. She seems to have reconciled the apparently irreconcilable: to achieve literary success whilst asserting — and being seen to assert — an ideological position", p. 26; see also Roslynn Haynes, "Fatalism and Feminism in the Fiction of Kate Grenville" *World Literature Written in English* 31:1 (1991), and Kerryn Goldsworthy, "Feminist Writings, Feminist Readings: recent Australian writing by women" *Meanjin* 144:4 (1985), pp.

debates largely revolve around the extent to which Lilian is a survivor or a victim of a society at the very least discomfited by her presence. At the centre of the discussions are Lilian's use of language (with her appropriation of the language of Empire through recitations of Shakespeare), and her body.⁷ For Roslynn Haynes *Lilian's Story* is an empowering tale that presents the possibility of overcoming gender stereotypes, where Lilian is a "twentieth-century Amazon insofar as male strength cannot prevail against her, but she also functions as parody of the sexually desirable Amazons."⁸ Thus Lilian transgresses stereotype as well as myth or archetype.

Similarly, for Gina Mercer, Lilian Singer is a successful character who rails against patriarchal abuse and marginalisation. According to Mercer, the "triumph of the novel is that it makes us see that for all her suffering, Lil succeeds in her efforts to be an independent, well known, well loved individual."⁹ For others Lilian's success is not so unequivocal, as Gerry Turcotte argues, "...Lilian Singer is one of the victims of the transition period, although Grenville has gone to great pains to end her book on a positive note."¹⁰

Whether as victim or agent, Lilian's body is at the centre of her story, and as Pam Gilbert points out:

It is Lil's size — a size that she cultivated as a girl to outwit her father... — which marks her out from the other shadowy and

506–51.

⁷ See Gerry Turcotte, "'The Ultimate Oppression': discourse politics in Kate Grenville's fiction" *World Literature Written in English* 29:1 Spring (1989), pp. 64–85; Roslynn Haynes, "Fatalism and Feminism"; Gina Mercer, "Kate Grenville" *Southerly* 45 (1985), pp. 295–300; Pam Gilbert, *Coming Out From Under*.

⁸ Roslynn Haynes, "Fatalism and Feminism", p. 63.

⁹ Gina Mercer, "Kate Grenville", p. 296.

¹⁰ Gerry Turcotte, "'The Ultimate Oppression'", p. 81.

insubstantial women in the novel, especially the girls of her generation... Lil is huge and powerful and solid.¹¹

According to Pam Gilbert, it is Lilian's fatness that prevents her historical disappearance as, Lilian Singer "is not forgotten, but has managed to achieve a legendary status: a grandeur and a greatness symbolically linked with her fatness."¹²

As well as being a site of disruption of the patriarchal feminine body, however, Lilian's fatness reveals the extent to which the feminine form in question is also a class specific body. The relationship between class and gender (and ethnicity) is extremely complex, with the recognition of class complicating any simple assertion of gender oppression.¹³ Conversely, an acknowledgment of gender inequality problematises any measurement of class. As such, the recognition of a classed body within *Lilian's Story* both reveals the existence of class distinction in the face of a myth of egalitarianism, and adds another dimension to the feminism of the novel.¹⁴ In the words of Cora Kaplan, "[t]o understand how gender and class — to take two categories only — are articulated together transforms our analysis of each of them."¹⁵

Lilian's body is the site of her transgression. Critics such as Pam Gilbert have identified the way Lilian "contravenes almost all gender stereotypes".¹⁶ The way Lilian breaks discursively-constructed class codes, however, has been overlooked. My

¹¹ Pam Gilbert, *Coming Out From Under*, p. 40.

¹² Pam Gilbert, *Coming Out From Under*, p. 41.

¹³ Anne Summers's *Damned Whores and God's Police* is an example of a text that presents an analysis of the oppression of a universal womanhood. As Summers says, "[t]he argument that women are a colonized sex can be generalized to include all industrialized Western countries, and is probably applicable to women in all known societies", p. 244. This generalised colonisation, however, does not take into account gender oppression and access to power that is mediated by class and race. As such all women do not have the same experience within "industrialised Western countries".

¹⁴ See Richard White, *Inventing Australia*, for a discussion on the perception of Australia as a classless society, and the historical origins of that view.

¹⁵ Cora Kaplan, *Sea Changes: essays on culture and feminism* (London: Verso, 1986), p. 149.

¹⁶ Pam Gilbert, *Coming Out From Under*, p. 39.

argument is that this class transgression is fundamentally centred on Lilian's body. A closer look at the stereotypes that Lilian contravenes reveals the extent to which class interests are embodied in the gendered form.

One of the main stereotyped figures that Lilian expands beyond is the very familiar figure of "the lady". This figure is characterised by constraint, passivity and illness, and is the physical presentation of middle, and dominant, class values. Inscribed upon this body through her pale skin and delicate appetite is a bourgeois morality that privileges feminine inactivity and insubstance as the lived expression of moral redemption and affluence.

The figure of the lady appears in a variety of guises including the Victorian lady, the "Femme fragile" or the romantic tubercular woman.¹⁷ Whether as literary topos or as a more material manifestation of specific political discourses, this figure represents an idealised femininity that replicates classed and gendered expectations. Food, eating, and fashion all combine to package a figure that expresses an idealised restraint, and presents an acceptable form, whilst demonstrating little by way of physical needs or passions. As noted in chapter one, the Victorian lady asserted her class position, paradoxically, through the denial of appetite and desire, and this denial symbolically "serves to recuperate the Fall and to re-establish lost innocence. Mythologically, her role is to refuse the apple and to keep her mouth firmly shut to temptation."¹⁸

Lilian's fault is, simply, to indulge her desires and allow her body to expand. She shows little in the way of restraint, as she seeks adventure and revels in physicality. There is little disputing Lilian's excessive body size, although she does not stay the same for the entire novel. She *is* overweight — fat. Such excess, however, is not tolerated by the dominant-classes, and her weight takes on a moral meaning out-of-proportion to her

¹⁷ The expression "femme fragile" is attributed to Ariane Thomalla in Barbara Korte, "The 'Femme Fragile': decline and fall of a literary topos" *Anglia* 105 (1987), pp. 366–89. See Susan Sontag, *Illness as a Metaphor*, for a discussion of tuberculosis and the construction of a feminine ideal.

¹⁸ Helena Michie, *The Flesh Made Word*, pp. 17–18 and p. 23.

physical stature, as she is perceived to be further and further outside of middle-class femininity.

Middle-class femininity (as typified by the Victorian woman) expresses specific class interests, announcing the affluence of the household through inactivity. This lady embodies bourgeois definitions of morality and sexuality that in turn establish difference between classes. When looking at a discursive ideal it becomes difficult to distinguish between bourgeois and middle-class femininity. Although there are very important distinctions between these two classes, the femininity that is privileged and promoted is one that maintains their collective access to power. As such, I use the terms middle-class and bourgeois to suggest a dominant-class whose discourses act to define a working-class through its difference, immorality and sexuality.¹⁹

In *Lilian's Story*, Lilian is perceived as deviant because she transgresses dominant-class discourses. Lilian does not become a member of the working class, but rather her violation of dominant-class morality and its corporeal representation, the lady, leaves her open to the same types of interventions directed towards the working classes.

Lilian's Story is set on the cusp of changing measures of femininity, when the Victorian lady is becoming less and less relevant within the newly-colonised society. The succeeding feminine ideal, embodying the virtues of the new society, may be slightly more robust (as she carries the burden of reproduction of the white society), but nevertheless she is still valued for her passivity (as opposed to masculine activity), and her adherence to the fashionable figure.²⁰ This figure reinforces the inherent weakness and "lack" of the feminine. Lilian, however, is still too big despite the changing shape of the ideal.

¹⁹ Lynette Finch, *The Classing Gaze*, presents a comprehensive discussion about the discursive construction of the notion of working-class, and subsequent distinctions between the respectable and unskilled classes.

²⁰ See Marie de Lepervanche, "The family: in the national interest?" in Gill Bottomley, Marie de Lepervanche & Jeanie Martin (eds) for a discussion on the politics of population growth in Australia.

Lilian's transgression of idealised femininity is identifiable even in childhood and appears more a transgression of gender than class. She is a huge, ungainly child devoid of grace or decorum. Labelled a "tomboy" she explores her parent's property, and desires nothing more than to play boisterous games with the boys. One of her great moments at school, allowing her to demonstrate her athleticism, is being included in a game of cricket:

I ran after every ball, leaped up and fell back even for those that sailed far over my head, and at the end of the day Rick said, *Tomorrow then, Lil, but not if Kev's better.* (p. 26)

As she grows, however, her precocious energy marks her as "unfeminine", and the response to this gender transgression becomes increasingly caustic and violent:

I was fat and brown, my plait thin — A *rat's tail*, Father said, fingering it and letting it drop — and was a tomboy, they all agreed. A *grubby little tomboy*, the lady with the big bust called me now. (p. 29)

When Lilian, emulating her father, stamps around the house, Norah rather despairingly entreats her to tread softly: "*A lady glides, Lilian*" (p. 5). In response to her questioning Lilian is told by her mother that "Alma is the maid... And I am a Lady. You will be a lady one day... Your father is a gentleman..." (p. 5). Appropriately middle-class feminine behaviour is neatly located within class stratification. Norah desires that Lilian "*learn elegance... and beauty...*" (p. 29), thereby becoming a lady. Ironically, Norah was physically unable to inculcate such behaviour in her daughter because of her own gendered retreat into the invalid middle-class female body:

She was now a mother of cold compresses, Dr. Benn's Pastilles, camphor on red flannel. *It is my chest*, she might sigh, or, *My head, Lilian, think of my head*, and I would tiptoe away. (p. 29)

Norah's body is not the only classed body within the text, however. Throughout the novel class is written on the body, a visible sign of difference, with size, shape and countenance all having classed meanings. Norah's lady visitors, along with Lilian's teacher, Miss Vine, speak the language of Empire. They embody an imperial bourgeoisie. Arriving for teas taken in the parlour the ladies, "removed their gloves, smoothing them on their knees, and withdrew long pins from their hats as they watched Alma breathe too loudly" (p. 9). Alma's heavy breathing, juxtaposed against the ladies' decorum, confirms her position as maid as much as any uniform.

The maid's breathing is also significant to Albion who, in the second novel about the Singer family — *Dark Places* — is equally excited and repulsed by her working-class body. He describes in lurid detail his sexual abuse of Alma which he justifies on the basis that her solid, "thick and secretive" body was lewd and lustful.²¹ After he has satisfied his own sexual needs, however, the solid body ceases to be alluring and instead "[h]er flesh was cold to me now, and a nasty raw colour, and she leaned like a sack against the tub, staring at the floor".²² Class is situated in the body. This classed femininity has ramifications for the sweaty Lilian, too, and it becomes clear that her transgression of gender codes has a class component.

In the school-yard gendered behaviour often camouflages a co-present class discourse with the children themselves policing gendered boundaries. Barred from the "boy's club", Lilian attempts to emulate their activities with her friend Ursula:

We are a gang, I told her. You are my gang, like Rick has a gang. Ursula sucked the end of her plait where the brown hair was pale and brittle. Girls don't have gangs, she said... You can't have a gang. (p. 27)

Nevertheless Lilian and the reluctant Ursula do embark upon a number of adventures. They often result in tears, however, with Ursula unable to match Lilian's exuberance.

²¹ Kate Grenville, *Dark Places* (Sydney: Picador, 1994), p. 188.

²² Kate Grenville, *Dark Places*, p. 188.

Ursula also proves to be an unreliable ally, only engaging in subversive actions when hidden behind Lilian's excited bulk.

When Lilian falls out of favour, however, Ursula attacks her for that vigour and spirit: "*You're too rough, Lil Singer, and you think you're someone special and you're not*" (p. 48). Lilian is both "too rough" in comparison to idealised female behaviour, and too egotistical, and this it seems is equally inappropriate. Nevertheless Lilian does not relinquish her dreams of heroism and success.

In her attempt to be like the boys, Lilian is thwarted not only by the other children but also by disapproving adults. When exuberantly yelling in the play-ground, she is reprimanded by her teacher — "*Lilian, do not shout like that, Miss Vine said... You are a young Lady, remember, not an animal*" (p. 35). With these words the class aspect of gender expectations becomes more visible. Miss Vine, who is decidedly ill at ease within the Australian landscape is engaged in the task of "civilising" through education. The animal, then, is the uncivilised, uneducated other who refuses imperial containment. There is no middle space between the "young lady" and the "animal", and as such the transgression of gendered, classed codes consign the young lady to the bush.

But it seems Lilian is oblivious to the dangers inherent in her transgression, and tries ever more ambitious ways to impress the two individuals that she most admires, Rick (the leader of the boys) and Ursula. In an attempt to demonstrate her tremendous courage — "*I am afraid of nothing*" (p. 44) — Lilian steals broken tiles from Miss Gash's property. The latter is a witch-like "spinster" living with her cat on a run-down property. Lilian's forays into the Gash property further exacerbate her transgression of class-gendered behaviour, by creating links with other "deviant" characters.

In her dress with a "rip down the back showing the skin, and the hat that did not hide a neck like a tortoise..." (p. 24), Miss Gash is transgressive and dirty: "[d]irt clung to the ragged hem of the postage stamps when Miss Gash straightened up from her spade and stared into the sky..." (p. 53). Anthropologist Mary Douglas writes of dirt as being

an offence against order, and that "it exists in the eye of the beholder".²³ Social ideas of dirt (hygiene, uncleanliness and purity) are linked to the social construction of distinction and limitation.

Dirt then, is never a unique, isolated event. Where there is dirt there is system. Dirt is the by-product of systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements. This idea of dirt takes us straight into the fields of symbolism and promises a link-up with more obviously symbolic systems of purity.²⁴

The transgression of boundaries is linked fundamentally with notions of pollution and defilement. Julia Kristeva expands upon Douglas's idea of pollution within a psychoanalytical theoretical model, and provides an analysis of how women become abject through, for example, the permeability of their bodies.²⁵

Using Douglas's theory of the cultural significance of dirt, Miss Gash and Lilian's contamination is enacted through their contact with the earth, as they literally get dirty. When questioned by the inquisitive Ursula, Lilian protests against the implied moral condemnation of Miss Gash because she is unclean:

Is it true she is dirty? Ursula asked me. *Is her dress really all torn? Is she really a witch with a black cat?* I could not be haughty for long. *It is a tabby,* I said coldly, trying to be haughty... *It is a tabby. And she is not dirty.* (pp. 58–59)

²³ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, p. 2.

²⁴ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, p. 36.

²⁵ See Julia Kristeva, *The Powers of Horror*. As I outlined in chapter one I have chosen to limit myself to a materialist analysis of fatness. See Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, for the use of Julia Kristeva's theories in the analysis of horror films. See also Kathleen Rowe, *The Unruly Woman* for the use of both Mikhail Bakhtin (the grotesque) and Mary Douglas (pollution).

This imagined dirt symbolises a moral stain, and as Rowe argues “[a]ll marginalized groups are vulnerable to pollution taboos that stigmatize them as less than human and their bodies as ‘dirty’, ‘foul’, ‘greasy’”.²⁶ The social anxiety that is produced by these two transgressive women within the social structure is expressed through the language of un/cleanliness, as “[p]hysical crossing of the social barrier is treated as a dangerous pollution”.²⁷

Despite Lilian’s protestations, Miss Gash is thought to be soiled by the wider community. She, like the young Lilian, disturbs notions of middle-class normality. The dominant-class response to her is to interpret her as “odd”, and as such her supposed slovenliness, measured against the pristine ideal of middle-class femininity, and eccentricity, becomes a sign of her failure within the middle-class moral universe. As Norah explains to Lilian,

[t]here is some story, Mother went on at last, that she was jilted early on, and went a little odd... It is hard for jilted women, she explained. Oddness is to be expected, poor thing. (p. 63)

With a laugh as “shrill as a rusted hinge”, Miss Gash is easily slotted into the category of mad-woman or witch as a result of her failure within the patriarchal schema (p. 53).

Through her secret forays into the overgrown yard Lilian discovers that Miss Gash’s oddness is rather exciting. As well as eating tomatoes with abandon, she is able to throw the stem,

bending her elbow and throwing from the shoulder in the businesslike way I had seen Rick do and that I had tried to copy. He had told me, though, that girls were missing a bone and could not throw properly. (p. 53)

²⁶ Kathleen Rowe, *The Unruly Woman*, p. 42.

²⁷ Mary Douglas *Purity and Danger*, p. 140.

After eating, Miss Gash smokes a pipe. This, again, seems a very masculine action to the naive Lilian. Gradually Lilian's urge to defile the older woman's property diminishes as she desires only "to watch her painting, or see her smoke her pipe again, and enjoy that rich smell"(p. 62). Lilian begins to find comfort in the figure of an older unmarried, independent, trouser-wearing, pipe-smoking woman. Miss Gash's humouring of the recalcitrant Lilian also undermines the former's categorisation as mad or "odd", and underlines the connections between the two characters.

As Lilian realises the attractiveness of Miss Gash's difference and its liberating potential, she is forced to renounce her. When out blackberrying Lilian and her school-mates are approached by Miss Gash, who Lilian has nonetheless mythologised to enhance her own fearless reputation. It soon becomes clear to the others, however, that instead of running daring raids upon Miss Gash's property, Lilian has been cultivating (albeit slowly) an acquaintance with the strange woman:

Miss Gash took us all by surprise, standing there suddenly in her postage stamps with a saucepan of berries in her hand. *Oh*, she said under the green hat, and I tried to become invisible or make her forget, but I saw her teeth in the shadow of the hat, and there was no denying that it was me she was looking at, smiling and saying *Hello, Lilian*, as if it was normal. (p. 68)

Faced with humiliation by her peers, who respond to the situation with smirks and sniggers, along with the spectre of further ridicule at school due to her association with Miss Gash, Lilian is trapped into abusing the woman:

If Miss Gash had gone away I would not have had to say anything, but she stood, and took a step closer as if to make sure it was me, and smiled again, and was about to say more, when my mouth opened and I heard myself shrieking, *You're a silly old loony old maid, you got a face like a prune, go away*. (p. 69)

Lilian's abuse of the old woman exposes the extent to which Lilian is still caught within (and complicit in) the discursive construction of deviant women, as she uses the patriarchal language to attack Miss Gash. Even though she turned the pejorative "old maid" in on itself when Rick had shouted at her, "*You ugly fatso, you ugly old maid, you make me sick*" — "Yes, I shrilled, and grabbed the title back from Rick, *I will be an old maid like Queen Elizabeth was an old maid, and Grace Darling*" (p. 45) — Lilian finds herself abusing Miss Gash in the same way that she herself has been attacked. The result of the outburst is that Lilian is abandoned by her school friends, and left miserable and alienated from Miss Gash. Furthermore, Lilian is reminded of the impossibility of her ever achieving her much desired heroic status, and of the tenuous nature of popularity.

This is not the first time that Lilian has been abandoned by her "friends", however. On a previous occasion when she was ignored by her old group Lilian was befriended instead by another isolated and visibly different child, the speechless Gwen. For school photographs,

[n]o one wanted to be next to shy Gwen, whose hair was always in her eyes and who glanced away at the moment the shutter clicked so that she was caught for ever as a shy blur. (p. 27)

Skinny, dirty Gwen, ostracised by the rest of the school pupils, spends her breaks foraging on the edges of the playground. Again, disposition is expressed corporeally, as the timid Gwen always "kept her head down as if fearing trouble" (p. 55). Gwen leads Lilian to "the corner of the yard where paspalum grew long and rank and no one went because of the snakes", the frightening (and "empty") margins (p. 55).

As much as she capitalises on Gwen's friendship for the effect it would have on her old friends — "I made it obvious that I did not care about Ursula or Rick or the silences that pooled around me" (p. 56) — she is also tainted by her association with Gwen and their ritual digging:

Lilian! Miss Vine, bending over my isosceles triangle, was appalled. *Class, I want you all to see.* My hands with their dark

crescents of nails were held up for everyone to see and someone clicked a tongue in disgust. I had never thought of myself as anything worse than fat, but was now displayed as frankly dirty. (p. 56)

The dirt is announced by Miss Vine to be “ingrained”, and leads to further isolation from the other pupils, especially the lovely Ursula: “I saw the way Ursula drew in her chair as if I was contagious, and the way her mouth had gone prim” (p. 56). Indeed, Lilian is increasingly covered with dirt throughout the course of her life until, finally, she is sleeping on the streets.

When Ursula is prepared to have her back, Lilian leaves Gwen on the outskirts, and Lilian’s reinstated status is ritually enacted by the sharing of Ursula’s date scone (pp. 58–59). Soon after Lilian’s betrayal Gwen leaves the school for good, having been poisoned by “*venomous fauna*” (p. 65); her wrist, the symbol of her frailty — “as bony as a bird’s claw” (p. 55) — is transformed by an infected swelling:

Gwen could not move from her desk, but sat shivering and twitching with a face that was grey and puffy. One finger was swollen to three times its normal size and the hand itself was swollen tightly like a sock full of sand. (p. 65)

On Gwen dirt indicates her distance from the middle-class. Barbara Korte points out the distinction between the “delicacy” of the idealised dominant-class woman and the working-class woman of the nineteenth century:

The upper strata of society could afford to sustain weakness, delicacy and illness as an aesthetic and fashionable phenomenon... Amongst the women of the working class, illness was synonymous with misery... the miserable

circumstances of these women meant that their illness did not lend itself to idealization.²⁸

In Gwen's case fragility has more to do with disease rather than romantic indisposition.

Even before falling ill, however, Gwen had been rejected by Ursula, on the basis that "*she's got the ringworm. And she smells*" (p. 59). Gwen's straggly hair, her inarticulateness (demonstrated by her inability to read), and alienation within the classroom, all underline her class difference as she falls outside of the normalised constructions of the middle-class (p. 32). Lynette Finch in *The Classing Gaze* argues that

[t]he working class is a discursive construct which came into existence at a given moment in history, through a particular range of practices and misunderstandings, and which emerged only in relation to particular ways of thinking.²⁹

These "ways of thinking" were bourgeois codes of morality that imposed specific meanings on divergence, such as sexual mores, measures of slovenliness and expression of intellect. Illness and filth are physical manifestations of her class position when set within the discourse of the dominant-class.

It is precisely this classed notion of cleanliness, docility and appropriateness that Lilian offends, through her association with both Miss Gash and Gwen, as well as her own propensity to get dirty. Lilian is aware of the dangers of being linked to these marginalised people, however, as her response to Rick's needling reveals:

Found a mate, have you, then? Rick said, and I tried not to be alarmed at being Gwen's mate, or too ashamed. *We have a project together, that is all*, I said with dignity... *A project, eh?* Rick said, and I wished I could think his grin was a friendly one. *You're two of a kind, you two.* (p. 57)

²⁸ Barbara Korte, "The 'Femme Fragile'", p. 377.

But Lilian mistakes the person at the centre of Rick's needling. Rick's sneering taunt is not about Gwen at all:

You will be just like her... Rick was losing his temper. *You're just the same*, he said more loudly, and I felt my smile stiffening as he watched it and became angry... *No, I mean you will be a batty old maid like that Miss Gash and dirty and loony....* (p. 57)

Gwen and Miss Gash are interchangeable in a world that associates disease and dirt with deviance and lunacy. The juxtaposition of uncleanness and madness with (implied) sexual unattractiveness, neatly presents the consequences for a woman transgressing gendered middle-class codes. Such a woman is rendered unattractive through her transgression of class/gender behaviour. Her femininity, constructed by class expectation, is called into question. The discursive normalisation of dominant-class values means that a woman who acts in an unfeminine manner is, by definition, unnatural.³⁰

It is as Lilian reaches adolescence that her body assumes even greater meaning. At tennis parties attended by her peers, Lilian's transgression of classed behaviour becomes increasingly pronounced. These tennis parties, held "on the serene lawns and courts of Kissing Point Road" (p. 73), were occasions of chaperoned courtship. As a young lady Lilian is required to attend the gatherings by parents concerned that she participate in the marriage market, in order to secure her financial future. The occasions, with mothers

²⁹ Lynette Finch, *The Classing Gaze*, p. 144.

³⁰ Jill Julius Matthews, *Good and Mad Women*, points out that sexuality has been central to women's femininity in the Australia of the previous century. That is, women were defined through their sexuality: "[i]n this scheme of things, the single woman was an anomaly, and a range of labels were available for her deviance. If she retained her sexuality for her own benefit, she was a prostitute or a lesbian. If she sublimated her sexuality into maternal caring outside her own family, she might be eligible for a simple occupational title, as nun, teacher or nurse... If she denied her sexuality she was a spinster, an old maid. Or if she retained caring contact with her family of origin... she might be a dutiful daughter or a maiden aunt", p. 133.

watching from behind fans in the shade, boys in striped blazers and straw boaters, and girls in silks and sashes, are courting soirees for the privileged set.

Rick and Ursula reign supreme, the most attractive and charming of all those in attendance. Lilian's old school friend, Ursula, with her "casually ringleted" hair and straight hems is the very model of the new femininity. Although she still makes time for Lilian, Ursula is sought after company:

Ursula had the prettiest laugh of them all and the most winsome way with her croquet mallet. Boys watched for the dimple in her cheek, and the pink shell of ear that showed if she tossed her hair a certain way. (p. 74)

Both Ursula and Norah, Lilian's mother, are described as "winsome" in their youth, underlining the similarities between the generations, but Norah, the Victorian lady, is married to the abusive, despotic and increasingly redundant Albion, a representative of the old moneyed-class. Ursula by contrast is destined to marry strong-jawed, mouth watering Rick, the new Australian man. And Rick has "the look of someone who knew what he wanted, even when what he wanted was just another scone" (p. 74).

There are also other girls in attendance at the party whose body shapes and sizes signal their class position as much as the silks and sashes with which they are decorated:

The girls were fragrant, slim, good enough to eat in their pale silks and their sashes of pink and yellow. Their feet were small, their shins straight in their white stockings, their hands inconspicuous. (p. 74)

But although these delectable bodies are available for consumption they do not eat. Even Ursula, whose plate is piled so high by the admiring Rick that she, "protested and laughed prettily" (p. 73), does not eat, instead merely squashing the cakes with a fork (p. 80).

Lilian is, in fact, the only figure who eats. In contrast to the other women, Lilian compounds the deviance of her excessive body by eating in public. The act of restraint and the denial of appetite becomes a means of expressing classed values, and denial in the face of excess is an act of privilege and as such an assertion of class. Lilian exercises no such restraint.³¹

Lilian's failure to achieve the docile (inviting) body of the other young ladies becomes the focus of the tennis mothers' discussions. Even her intelligence (she gains admission to university, coming second in state examinations) is unable to redeem her, as Albion Singer pronounces, "*Women do not need education*" (p. 77). Lilian's characteristic use of food for escape and protection becomes the vehicle for her ridicule: "*Is she feeding those brains of hers, do you think?*" (p. 73).

Lilian's appearance and demeanour is measured against the other young ladies, who have shaped their bodies within the discourse of middle-class femininity, their docility underwriting the affluence of the dominant-class. Despite her attempts Lilian consistently fails to be contained within the fashion of femininity:

Although I had tried every colour and every kind of laugh, nothing eased the lawn parties for me. Yellow made me look bilious and my laugh always showed too many teeth for prettiness. In white I was sallow, and pink made me look as if I was trying too hard. (p. 75)

Lilian is too vibrant to emulate the enfeebled body of her mother, and she does not desire to assume the chaste yet promising body of the young women at the tennis parties. As she tells Ursula, "*I would be a mediocre pretty girl... And I am too arrogant to be mediocre*" (p. 81). Indeed, no matter how hard Lilian tried she would not be able to hide her large feet, scarred legs, and a mouth made for much more than demure smiles.

As well as consoling herself with cream pie and ginger beer, prickling and sweating in "layers of silk, and white stockings that did their best to suffocate me..." (p.

³¹ See Helena Michie, *The Flesh Made Word*, pp. 17–18.

73), Lilian retreats to the trees with the uncoordinated Duncan, much to the chagrin of the other party goers, and her father. Such behaviour not only leaves Lilian open to ridicule, it also raises questions about her sexual behaviour. She risks gaining a “reputation” as wanton. As Ursula informs her, “*Lil, they are saying you will do anything... they say you are after him*” (p. 100). When Albion is made aware that his daughter spends her time in trees, his response is typically vitriolic:

*Lilian, you disgust me... Up a tree with a lout from the bush,
even if he will be rich... Showing the world your drawers... Has
someone told you that that is the way to catch a husband,
showing him your vile drawers?* (p. 98)

Lilian’s fatness is amplified through comparison with the fragrant, slim young women, and her size is inflated by classed docility. The restrained and controlled sexuality of the ideal is unattainable for Lilian, she is too big, and her fatness is mobilised as an indicator of deviance.

Interestingly, Rick’s mother, Mrs Palmer, was “fatter even than [Lilian] was” (p. 39). Like Lilian, her body is too large for the niceties of the dominant-class, signifying as it does the family’s nouveaux status and working-class origins. As I argue in chapter one, class is one way in which social meaning is inscribed upon the body, and the bodies of Grenville’s characters are shaped by discourses of class. Mrs Palmer’s robust figure suggests a working-class female body.³² Rick’s mother is an embarrassment to him at the tennis parties where he courts the beautiful Ursula. Although he is able to conceal the origins of his family money (new money made from rubber bands), in an attempt to authenticate his own classed body, his mother’s out-sized figure reveals too much;

³² Mike Donaldson, *Time of Our Lives*, argues that the body expresses class, and cites a number of studies that demonstrate this. He argues that for working-class men “their bodies are what they sell in order to sustain themselves and others — and more complex — somehow their bodies must bear the weight of the creation and maintenance of social masculinity”, p. 17.

His mother, fluttering vastly in a rather loud blue, had sat under the jacarandas once or twice. But the other mothers had seemed not to hear her comfortable advice about tea leaves on the ailing azaleas or the best way to deal with bird droppings on flagstones. She had stopped coming, and Rick lost his congested look. (pp. 74–75)

When Mrs Palmer ceases to attend the tennis parties, her son is able to cultivate his image according to the form of dominant-class expectations. Obscured income is another indicator of class, although in this case it is not a distinction between working-class and non-working-class, but rather between fractions of the dominant-class. The Singer's income is never specified, with only vague references to an office, the obfuscation locating the family within the "upper echelons" of the dominant-class. By obscuring the origins of his own family fortune Rick secures his place in the upper echelons of the ruling class. Lilian notices that,

[n]o one was going to know that Rick had fought among dunnies and cauliflower stalks, or that his father had made his pile from rubber. *On the manufacturing side*, Rick might admit if pressed, but never *in rubber*. (p. 74)

Unlike Mrs Palmer, however, as "[t]he daughter of a gentleman" who "will have to marry money", Lilian has little option but to attend the parties.

Lilian is understood as out-sized or excessive in relation to the middle-class body, and her "failure" within the dominant-class gendered schema allows Lilian to be constructed as similar to the working-class body, in the sense that she becomes open to the same types of class-based intervention. As noted in chapter one, Lynette Finch argues that discourses have effects; the dominant and working classes receive different treatment,

and are incarcerated in class-specific institutions.³³ The discourses that surround the normalising of female behaviour and bodies, then, have material effects. Thus the construction of Lilian as deviating from normalised middle-class femininity is the very discourse that allows her abuse and eventual incarceration.

When Lilian fails to adhere to the prescribed type, her body is socially constructed as disgusting, dirty, whore-ish and obese, all terms reserved for the working-class by the dominant-classes. Ultimately there is no redemption for Lilian as Albion tells her:

Lilian, he said as if reminding me who I was. *Lilian*, you are an example of the degeneracy of the white races. I must have stood blinking in my surprise and Father hissed... *You are sterile and degenerate, and as corrupt as a snake.* (pp. 178–79)

Women's cleanliness is traditionally a site of tension and anxiety, and any woman perceived to be wanton is condemned as dirty. Moreover there is also a class component to the perception of un/cleanliness. According to Finch "[f]emale bodies were centrally located within the entire classing process and in middle class intervention into the working class."³⁴ Albion labels Lilian in sexual and class terms.

As she grows older Lilian's sexuality becomes the site of contested morality. Lilian and her mate, Duncan, from the tennis parties, would venture onto the beach at night, hand in hand, where, Lilian "hungry for each next step, each new shape of skin waiting to be discovered..." (p. 111), enjoyed long kisses, lying in the sand beneath the moonlight. Duncan, after initially protesting, "*you should not let me do this*", then asking, "*Do you let other men do this?*" (p. 111), spends the night on the beach with Lilian, consoling himself by arguing that the "fault" lies with her: "*You devil... you are trying to egg me on, eh, Lil?*" (p. 111). Ultimately, however, Duncan can do no more for Lilian than kiss, as he attempts to explain,

³³ Lynette Finch, *The Classing Gaze*, p. 15.

³⁴ Lynette Finch, *The Classing Gaze*, p. 106.

[w]hen he looked at me, it was a plea. *Look, Lil, he entreated, you are a good mate. I cannot take advantage... You are a good mate, and a person of class*, Duncan said in a confused way. (p. 111)

Although no other beau kisses Lilian, there is another character who is deeply affected by Lilian's burgeoning sexuality, and that is her father, Albion Singer. He becomes increasingly obsessed with her expansive body which through its very excess announces her sexuality. Although Lilian may have enough flesh to prevent Albion beating her, it is not enough to prevent sexual assault, and indeed provides the rhetorical justification for it.

When Lilian is in her early twenties Norah is "bullied into her cruise" (p. 119) by Albion, on the grounds that she has failed in her mothering; "*You are a bad example*, Father shouted at her... *Your daughter is full of womanliness*" (p. 119).³⁵ Norah's physical incapacity has progressed from feminine docility to eccentricity. Albion has ulterior motives in sending Norah away, however, as he desires to be alone with Lilian, and it is, in part, Norah's emotional, mental and finally physical absence that leaves Lilian vulnerable to attack. This is not to say that Norah is responsible for Albion's violence; rather, it suggests the limitations of the patriarchal femininity that Norah is compelled to cultivate.³⁶

³⁵ Jill Julius Matthews writes in *Good and Mad Women* of the increasing pressure upon women in the twentieth century with the mobilisation of a number of "maternalist" discourses including "scientific" mothering, and the eugenic-influenced colonial concern over birth rates: "Bringing up children, the heart of mothering, was a social activity in which women became increasingly beset by a farrago of standards and confusion of judges", p. 184.

³⁶ Veronica Thompson draws a link between the depiction of mother/daughter relationships in Australian fiction and the colonial relationship between Australia and Britain, the mother country. Thompson argues that Lilian and Norah's estrangement is manifest as an eating disorder which is in turn a "metaphor for the oppositions and ambivalences contained in the metaphorical mother/daughter relationship fostered by imperial discourse": "You Are What You Eat: women, eating and identity in Kate Grenville's 'Lilian's Story' and Barbara Hanrahan's 'The Scent of Eucalyptus'" *Ariel* 27:4 October (1996), p. 132.

The culmination of Albion's obsession with, and anger against, Lilian's body is rape. Having evaded Albion, and a proposed outing, by hiding in her childhood refuge beneath the plumbago in the yard, Lilian explores the empty house, taking each room in turn. In Norah's room Lilian finds her mother's corset

of pink satin [that] would hardly have contained even one of my massive thighs, but I could not bear to put it back in its drawer, and hung it over my chest like a carapace. (p. 123)

She wears this armour through the house, ending her journey of discovery in front of a mirror which "in an empty house is a pleasure like no other" (p. 124). With the discarded corset lying beside her "like a small incomplete person" (p. 124), she begins to explore her body;

While my breasts eyed me from the mirror, I watched long enough to see the red marks of my underclothes fade from my flesh. Air was like water on my skin and the long mirror held beauty in its frame. Even my back smiled and dimpled. (p. 125)

It is while she is masturbating, and filling "the room with sounds like a storm in treetops, like rivers, like horses galloping, and was preparing for the moment when flesh would be transformed" (p. 125), that Albion returns, and in a disturbing scene, proceeds to silence her in a calculated and unrelenting manner.

It is a construction of Lilian as womanly and unlady-like that provides the rhetorical justification of her abuse. This is not to play down the extent to which Albion is a flawed and nasty character, but rather to extend the analysis by demonstrating the class aspect of her abuse. Albion has steadily accelerated his verbal abuse of Lilian as she grows towards sexual maturity, calling her at one point "*A tight and seamy vixen*" (p. 117). It is the perception of Lilian as deviant in class as well as moral terms that provides the rhetorical space for her abuse as the dirt of childhood becomes in adulthood the stain of sexuality, with her expansive body occupying the site of contention.

Significantly, incest has historically been mobilised by the dominant-class as a site of investigation and intervention into the so-called depraved classes, and “came to be identified as, first, an indicator of difference among the working classes and, second, as symptomatic of the unnaturalness of the feeble-minded and depraved”.³⁷ Within *Lilian's Story*, then, the abuse reveals the “depravity” of the dominant-classes, and exposes the middle-class discursive strategies that shape and define the female body. Lilian's body has expanded beyond that of a lady, to working-class availability and otherness, and it is precisely the associated womanliness that provides Albion with his justification for his actions. For Albion, Lilian's body is the body of a degenerate, sexually available working-class woman.³⁸

Although the attack silences Lilian, as she is unable to speak of her abuse or continue her exploration of her sexuality, it does not reduce her body, nor minimise the transgression that she is seen to embody. Indeed, Lilian's transgression becomes more marked as she goes wild in a parody of masculinist retreats into the bush. She travels great distances on foot during the night, her feet becoming “broader and stronger... carrying me out of the house at night to find something I had lost” (p. 137). Lilian gives up walking only when the milkman, Rob, who had seen her on her wanderings, provides her with an old bicycle. Lilian's eccentricity, embodied by her tanned skin, broad feet and

³⁷ Lynette Finch, *The Classing Gaze*, p. 60.

³⁸ Susan Midalia argues that the prison scenes, added to the original novel on the advice of the American publishers, reveal the extent of Lilian's class privilege. Lilian spends two weeks in prison after being arrested for damaging a taxi. In the prison Lilian realises the difference between herself and the working-class women for whom life is incarceration. Midalia writes, “the novel makes explicit the importance of economic and social determinants in its exploration of an individual's destiny. In this way, then, both through its presentation of sisterhood and in its recognition of the importance of social class, *Lilian's Story* suggests the limitations [of] its own liberal feminist assumptions”. Susan Midalia, “The Contemporary Female *Bidungsroman*: Gender, genre and the politics of optimism” *Westerly* 41:1 Autumn (1996), p. 95. That Lilian ends up in prison at all marks the extent of her transgression of the femininity of the dominant-classes. She is an “unruly woman” in the sense that Kathleen Rowe describes in *The Unruly Woman*. See also Susan Midalia, “Art for Woman's Sake: Grenville's *Lilian's Story* as female *Bidungsroman*” in Hilary Fraser and R.S. White, *Constructing Gender*, pp. 253–68.

muscled legs, is juxtaposed against the pale inert bodies of Norah and Ursula, and mobilised as evidence of her madness by those around her.³⁹

When Albion recognises his failure to diminish Lilian he has her committed to a mental asylum, thereby constructing her as feeble-minded. This happens at the point that Lilian's difference can no longer be contained within the Singer household, unlike Norah whose strangeness (and transgression) is concealed within the home and the cruise. Lilian, her reputation already tarnished by the mere fact of her excessive body, is *seen* on her forays into the night. The increasingly enraged Albion again attempts to contain her behaviour through coercion: "*Lilian, you do not understand. If you will not stop this — there are complaints — I will have to take action*" (p. 141). Her transgression has been made public, Lilian has "*run wild*" (p. 145), and the complaints provide Albion with the justification to institutionalise her.⁴⁰ Her construction as deviant is complete, and she is now utterly "dirty and loony" (p. 57).

Although Lilian's childhood and early adulthood is extremely tragic, she does not disintegrate as a result of her abuse (both physical and institutional), and despite spending a great portion of her life within a mental institution, when she leaves she makes her mark upon the world. It is no coincidence that the final section of the novel, "A Woman", commences with Lilian's incarceration, as it is within the mental institution that Lilian grows into womanhood, learning new languages and assuming the mantle of the mad-

³⁹ See Stephen Garton, *Medicine and Madness: a social history of insanity in New South Wales 1880-1940* (Kensington: New South Wales UP, 1988), for a discussion of the changing definitions of insanity, and the way such definitions have class, cultural and gender components.

⁴⁰ Stephen Garton, *Medicine and Madness*, argues that the rates of admission of single women living with their parents to asylums in New South Wales from 1880-1930 reflects a "growing familial intolerance of the unmarried daughter", p. 144. In this period single women comprised 40% of the female population in asylums. He also points out that "[w]omen who were considered by their families to have failed in their duties of wife, mother, daughter or sister had fewer mitigating circumstances that might weigh against the decision to request their admission", p. 146. It could be argued that once Lilian is defined as inadequate her incarceration is inevitable.

woman.⁴¹ She takes control over the meanings of her body. Once out on the streets of Kings Cross she replaces layers of silk with “layers of shabby clothes” (p. 170), and looks people in the eye, fully aware of her public image:

...sometimes I spoke to them in ways that took them by surprise,
and made them fearful. *Mad*, I saw them think as they watched
me looking into their faces, *there is something wrong with her*.
(p. 170)

As has been argued by other critics, Lilian imposes herself upon Sydney finding a voice and expression through the persona of a mad-woman:

Non-rational insights... are the province of women, especially of
Lilian. Lilian draws into her consciousness the words she hears
and the emotions she experiences and makes them part of
herself, devising a new language of her own that “interconnects
the body and language.”⁴²

These “non-rational insights”, opposed to the rational words of patriarchal power, are insights that also disrupt the classed discourse that associates “rationality” with the bourgeois.

Lilian also uses the language of Shakespeare in her social disruption. It is a delicious irony that this fat, dirty, street-woman speaks the language of high culture, academia, imperialism and masculinity. Haynes argues that ambiguities within the Shakespearian works lend themselves to such a use, and she maintains that “Shakespeare’s metaphorical gender transcends the narrowly masculine and represents a

⁴¹ Kate Grenville refuses the reading that Lilian is crazy through the sympathetic treatment of the character, as well as by positioning her experience within a broader social field. This positive redefining of madness is also found in, for example, Janet Frame’s *Faces in the Water* (London: Women’s Press, 1980).

⁴² Paul Salzman quoted in Haynes, “Fatalism and Feminism”, p. 73.

truly 'androgynous mind'".⁴³ More important, however, is the recognition that Lilian "has taken the bard's words and stripped them of their codes and referents and has replaced them with her own systems of codification."⁴⁴ Through the appropriation of a masculinist voice, Lilian has decontextualised (and thereby disrupted) the dominant-classes' ownership of high culture, as well as transgressing patriarchal gender distinctions. Lilian has, then, escaped from the body of the lady, finally, through the very discourses that sought to impose it.

But the body of the lady from which Lilian escapes is revealed to be flawed and unrewarding. Women's (dominant) class position, mediated as it is by male access to ownership of production requires constant vigilance to maintain, and even then,

...the lady is always in a state of becoming: one acts like a lady, one attempts to be a lady, but one never is a lady. In effect, then, throughout her lifetime a woman's behaviour will reflect continued efforts to attain what is essentially an unattainable status.⁴⁵

As the fates of Norah, Kitty and Ursula show, participation in dominant-class femininity does not necessarily secure one's future.

That the family (patriarchal and nuclear), the central measure of bourgeois morality, is also a consummate failure within *Lilian's Story* is significant, as the whole basis of the dominant-class values embodied in its feminine ideal is undermined from the outset.⁴⁶ While the ladies fade, Lilian grows, empowered and enriched through her constant transgression of the dominant-class female body.

⁴³ Roslynn Haynes, "Fatalism and Feminism", p. 77. See chapter 4 for a discussion on androgyny.

⁴⁴ Gerry Turcotte, "'The Ultimate Oppression'", p. 77.

⁴⁵ Geer Litton Fox in Jill Julius Matthews, *Good and Mad Women*, p. 7.

⁴⁶ See Lynette Finch, *The Classing Gaze*, for a discussion of the role of the family in the assertion of class difference.

Bourgeois femininity ultimately fails Norah, Lilian's mother. As a figure in the mould of the "Victorian lady" Norah represents a femininity that is becoming out-dated, and this has the effect of amplifying her passivity and ineffectiveness. As has already been argued, Norah as the infirm, wan lady is caught within the ever-changing expectations of womanhood, being held responsible for Lilian's failure to adhere to the docile body of the dominant-class.⁴⁷ Ironically, it is Norah's retreat into the gendered-class position available to her that renders her ineffectual in the schooling of her daughter, and compromises any attempt at communication.⁴⁸

Norah's life is lived in silence and spaces, where she becomes increasingly unable to communicate, lapsing from inarticulateness into sleep. Lilian notices that Norah while sleeping "could be recognised as the young girl proud of her husband and her Valenciennes" (p. 102). But adherence to dominant-class codes of femininity, primarily the containment of female sexuality within marriage and the docile body, leaves Norah bereft of life. As Haynes points out, "Coition is rarely if ever a cause for celebration by Grenville's female characters, being a further occasion for an exercise of male supremacy".⁴⁹ Thus the young Norah photographed, "standing erect and winsome, smiling, one hand on the saddle of a stuffed donkey, a waterfall frozen behind her, in a dress made of chips of light" (p. 5), turns into the "woman of pale colours". Lilian intuitively that Norah, "had become a woman who lived behind a curtain drawn across her face, and she spoke most happily when she thought no one was listening" (p. 77). Norah dies when Lilian is incarcerated, and Lilian is left to cry under the cover of the violent harassment of the inmates, thinking of her dead mother,

⁴⁷ Jill Julius Matthews argues in *Good and Mad Woman* of women in general that "[j]udgments of her mothering would be made according to the moral or gender standards of the psychiatrists. Failures on such criteria would be translated into medical facts, objective symptoms of mental illness", p. 185.

⁴⁸ See Lynette Finch, *The Classing Gaze*, for a discussion of the Victorian mother's role in maintaining the sexual purity of her daughter.

⁴⁹ Rosalynn Haynes, "Fatalism and Feminism", p. 62.

who would never know now if there was finally someone for her hopeless daughter, and whose scent of lavender water and camphor would fade from all her things and only come to life when I sat in the sun, smoothing a curl around my finger, remembering her. (p. 158)

By contrast, Lilian's Aunt Kitty (Albion's sister) shows signs of a similar vitality to that of Lilian. As a widow her access to money is not mediated by her husband, affording her a freedom unavailable to Norah. Her habit of drinking alcohol-laced barley water facilitates her unusual behaviour. The contrast between Norah and Kitty is most pronounced when on a visit to Kitty's home by Norah and Lilian, a small bird flies into the house. The young Lilian

laughed to see my aunt, bursting the buttons on her dress, galloping around the room with a prawn net, her red face turned up to the ceiling, gasping. Mother stood on the piano stool and made hopeless shooing gestures while she called out, *No! No! No! No!* over and over. (p. 37)

Kitty's vibrancy and transgression, however, is increasingly obscured by alcoholism, and she recognises the distance between her dreams and lived reality (p. 85). In *Dark Places* Albion writes of the young (Kitty) as being agile, fit and intelligent but "[b]ecause she was a girl, Greek and Algebra were kept from [her]".⁵⁰ Instead, her "unalterably plain" angular body was subject to all manner of poultice and instruction to shape it in a more acceptable form.⁵¹ Kitty is compromised by her capitulation to the dominant-class expectations. Although she tells Lilian, "*My own days are nearly over. . . But it is just beginning for you. And for girls now it is all different*" (p. 107), she still attempts to advise Lilian upon the appropriate qualities required in a young lady. An ironic distance is

⁵⁰ Kate Grenville, *Dark Places*, p. 11.

⁵¹ Kate Grenville, *Dark Places*, pp. 11–12.

constructed between the advice and any thought that Lilian should follow it, however, by Kitty's tipsy burping and slopping of her drink (p. 106).

It is Kitty who comes to Lilian's rescue when she is in the asylum, organising Lilian's release, and an income from Albion: "*I have blackmailed your rotten father!... I told him I would spread stories about his mad wife and daughter*" (p. 162). She may well have added herself to the list, of course, but the significant distinction between Norah and Kitty is the latter's access to money.

When Kitty visits Lilian in the asylum the distinction between sane and insane is clearly defined in class terms, through body, accessories and money. Even though Kitty was slightly ragged and tipsy (having to leave Lilian in search of her next drink), as Lilian observes Kitty

was a person of authority. Riser [the nurse] did not laugh, even when Aunt Kitty stumbled in the doorway, and when she turned to him and said in a dignified way, *Thank you, nurse*, Riser did not snicker as he did when I spoke, but nodded and left. Money had changed hands, I could see that. (p. 160)

Thin Kitty remains identifiably bourgeois, despite her transgression (alcoholism and financial independence). But in the end Kitty, like Norah, fades away, disintegration being the accompaniment of bourgeois, patriarchal femininity. Lilian visits the dying Kitty in hospital and finds her "lying so tiny beneath the hospital covers, her eyes grown huge with what was happening to her" (p. 177).

The dying Kitty tells Lilian, "*Oh, Lil... you are the person I would have liked to be*" (p. 178), and in an attempt to secure Lilian's financial future she bequeaths what is left of her estate to her, thus freeing Lilian from any remaining obligation to her father. It is the final freedom as Lilian has already moved into the streets, leaving the flat that Kitty had rented with Albion's money. Reunited with an old university beau, Frank (F.J. Stroud), who was also alienated from the bourgeois world of the university, Lilian resolves to "live long, and with gusto" (p. 177).

The final figure to expose the limitations of the dominant-class lady is Ursula. As the new Australian woman, Ursula embodies the mobility of the young, attractive woman. Popular romance underwrites patriarchal sex relations, presenting women's class position (and identification) as mobile:

Women are... without class, because the cut and fall of a skirt and good leather shoes can take you across the river and to the other side: the fairy-tales tell you that goose-girls can marry kings.⁵²

In other words, the ability of a woman to fashion her body to the appropriate docile form is, according to the mythology, the means by which she secures her (financial) future. Ursula, who lives in a street (rather than a named residence like Rosecroft) is able, through careful cultivation, to "catch" the eligible Rick who despite (or perhaps because of) his nouveaux, made-money status is an embodiment of the new Australian. The myth of an Australian egalitarian society is married with a patriarchal romantic mythology that serves to obscure the differences in access to power. By adhering to the dominant-class femininity, Ursula demonstrates her non-working-class status, thus becoming eminently marriageable.

Despite Ursula's corporeal replication of bourgeois respectability and promising youth, she is unable to protect herself from the Depression. Abandoned by Rick who in the face of financial ruin becomes the "bride of Trotsky" (p. 222), Ursula's essential vulnerability is revealed. It is the aged Ursula who finds Lilian collapsed in the street:

Until at last the woman in lilac shantung was kneeling beside me, and her handbag of lizard-skin was lying in the grit. The woman took my hand and knelt so violently I heard stitches crack, and supported me with an arm around my shoulder, and I could smell her perfume... The woman in lilac shantung was wearing

⁵²Carolyn Steedman cited in Anne Cranny-Francis, *Feminist Fiction: feminist uses of generic fiction*

lilac gloves, but as she knelt beside me, becoming dirty, she tore off those gloves and smoothed the hair back from my face with a soft pampered hand. (p. 221)

The dirt so despised at school is redeeming as Ursula, contaminated by Lilian's filth, recognises her own pretence:

In the ambulance I could see her knees and was touched by the way the skin was grey with pavement dirt, and how each knee was capped by the large round hole in each stocking. On the skirt of the lilac shantung were marks and smudges now that looked permanent, like those on my own, humbler clothes. In the smell of starched sheets and antiseptic I was calmer now, and fingered the lilac shantung, and would have liked to smooth the skin of the knees, but did not dare. I whispered, and although the words did not come out the way they were intended, Ursula understood, and brushed at the marks, and wet a finger with spit to see if they would be removed that way. *No, it does not matter, Lil*, she said. *It is time I gave up pretending.* (pp. 221–22)

The cultivation of bourgeois femininity and attractiveness ultimately fails to secure Ursula's future.

It is clear, then, that the recognition of the intersection of gender and class substantially broadens the feminism of this text. Lilian's outsized body is the corporeal site of transgression as she expands beyond not only a patriarchal system of gender but also breaches a classed gendered form. Lilian, as a daughter of the dominant-classes is too fat and robust for the body of the lady, and it is the intersection of class and gender that provides, if not the impetus, then the rhetorical justification for her abuse.

Lilian becomes a fat girl in part to foil her obsessive and violent father. Although this fatness affords Lilian a certain freedom in childhood and early adulthood it does not, in the end, protect her from the ravages of (patriarchal) abuse. Indeed her body is interpreted within a classed discourse as a demonstration of her deviance. It is not until Lilian lives in the mental asylum and takes on the mantle of the mad-woman that her fatness becomes the unrestrained expression of her identity.

By contrast, the ladies, considered normal within the discourse of dominant-class femininity, namely Norah, Kitty and Ursula, fade away, their fragile femininity conspiring with their mediated class position to trap them within unsatisfactory, maddening and unrewarding lives. Norah's madness leaves her inarticulate and powerless, whereas Lilian's madness (which by comparison is determined by state intervention) is the vehicle of a personal expression that continues to challenge the unspoken, naturalised and classed social discourses. Where Kitty loses her vitality through alcoholism, Lilian is able to expand into life. Finally, Ursula who good-naturedly offered to help Lilian shape her body into the desirable form that she herself encapsulates, becomes a figure subsumed by her clothes, a woman in a lilac shantung carrying a lizard-skin handbag (p. 221). There is hope for Ursula, however, as she kneels in the dirt to help the ailing Lilian, who even in illness provides the means for Ursula's self-recognition. Always outsized, it is in her old age that Lilian assumes heroic proportions, finally beyond the reach of dominant-class values, and free, on her final taxi ride through Sydney, to look back:

I fill myself now, and look with pity on those hollow men in their suits, those hollow women in their classic navy and white. They have not made themselves up from their presents and their pasts, but have let others do it for them — while I, large and plain, frightening to them and sometimes to myself, have taken the past and the present into myself... my name will live, in the different kinds of smiles on the faces of people remembering me, and that is enough immortality for me. (p. 227)

It is as a loony old maid that Lilian is able to express herself, finding an identity through the very form that it was always feared she embodied.

Chapter Six

“Forgive me. My body is showing”: Revealing the Invisible Giant in Susan Swan’s *The Biggest Modern Woman of the World*

For all of her forty-two years almost every part of Anna Swan in *The Biggest Modern Woman of the World* (1988) is measured, appraised and speculated upon, from her hand size to the length her vagina. On her death bed Anna says, “I was born to be measured and I do not fit in anywhere”.¹ She is the object of medical and scientific observation as her transgression of a normal female body provides the justification for many instances of violation. Her giant frame becomes the focus for those wishing to establish the boundaries of normality. It is the body of the giant that is the focus of this chapter, a body that announces its excess only to be continually confined and reduced. I look first at the critical response to the novel and its post-modern dimension before moving to a detailed discussion of the text itself. I also discuss the applicability of more radical post-structural theories to the analysis of a post-modern novel.

Susan Swan, the author of *The Biggest Modern Woman of the World* a novel loosely based on the life of giantess Anna Swan, has been depicted as one of the “bad girls” of Canadian writing, primarily because of her focus on “aberrant behaviour”, especially expressions of sexuality that are considered to be outside of the mainstream.² Susan Swan is described as wanting

¹ Susan Swan, *The Biggest Modern Woman of the World* (London: Pandora, 1988), p. 332. All further references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

² See Susanne Kelman, “CanLit’s Bad Girls”, *Chatelaine*, Oct (1994), pp.108–11.

to bring a more openly erotic element to fiction, to help women stop denying their sexual feelings and escape from the roles that have been imposed on them.³

Although the eroticism of *The Biggest Modern Woman of the World* is debateable it does reveal all aspects of Anna Swan's body and functions from lengths of orifices to the experience of overwhelming menstruation or urination.⁴ The novel also focuses on a woman trying to express her sexuality and escape restrictive social expectations.⁵

The critical response to Swan's first novel is mixed. One critic writes that although the subject material of the novel is "potentially fascinating... Unfortunately the fictional imagination behind the project isn't sufficiently versatile or daring to liberate the possibilities. Execution falls well short of conception".⁶ A descendant of the Swan family is similarly disappointed with the novel, distressed by the post-modernist play with fiction and history, regretting, "that the author felt that the true story of the giantess's life was not worthy of writing".⁷ By contrast, Paul Wilson praises the text saying,

³ Susanne Kelman, "CanLit's Bad Girls", p. 108.

⁴ It could be argued that Susan Swan is challenging notions of the erotic or pornographic in this novel. *The Biggest Modern Woman of the World* is an explicit text both in its presentation of sex and the body in general. Whether or not this explicitness equals eroticism is a subject for greater analysis than I can provide here, as it raises questions about distinctions between, and definitions of, eroticism and pornography.

⁵ Susanne Kelman, "CanLit's Bad Girls", p. 110. Like Kate Grenville's *Lilian's Story*, *The Biggest Modern Woman of the World* is being made into a film, and this again raises questions about the translation of the literary fat lady onto the big screen. I have been unable to obtain any further information on the film adaptation of Swan's novel, or its release date, so cannot include an analysis of it in this thesis.

⁶ Douglas Hill, "Fiction" *University of Toronto Press Quarterly* 53:4 Summer (1984), p. 318.

⁷ Linda Swan-Ryan cited in Teresa Heffernan, "Tracing The Travesty: constructing the female subject in Susan Swan's 'The Biggest Modern Woman of the World'" *Canadian Literature* Summer 133 (1992), p. 26.

[i]t is a measure of the author's abilities that the book can be grasped, appreciated, and enjoyed on several different levels: as straight story, as colourful social history, as pure entertainment and even as a novel of ideas.⁸

Almost without exception reviewers refer to the height of the author herself 6'2", and a possible familial connection to the giant. As with Keri Hulme and her character Kerewin Holmes, parallels are drawn between the writer Susan Swan and character Anna Swan:

If she isn't quite as tall as the heroine of *The Biggest Modern Woman of the World* — Anna Swan, a real-life 19th century Canadian giant who may have been a distant relative — Swan was almost six feet tall by age 14.⁹

Another reviewer writes that "[t]he author, who as a child had almost reached her adult height of 6'2", was teased about being another Anna Swan."¹⁰ Swan anticipates this reading by including a preface which outlines the connection between the two women. She writes, "I knew about her as a child because we have the same name and because my branch of the family is tall" (Preface). She goes on to say that "neither her descendants nor my relatives have enough information on our backgrounds to establish a connection" (Preface). Where Keri Hulme rejects the critical reading of *the bone people* as partly autobiographical, Susan Swan embraces such potential in her own text. Swan seems at once to confirm and resist the identification of author with character. The body of the giant is contained within the body of the author as one leaks into the other. *The Biggest Modern Woman of the World* destabilises

⁸ Paul Wilson, "Larger than life: from the sprawling story of an unruly Titan to a skilful, if familiar, look at the havoc adultery can wreak" *Books in Canada* April (1984), p. 30.

⁹ Susanne Kelman, "CanLit's Bad Girls", p. 108.

¹⁰ Donna Guglielmin, "Review" *Canadian Author and Bookman* 59:4 Summer July (1984), p. 25.

both the separation of author and story, and the countervailing expectation that women write only about their own experiences:

[t]he constraints that the female writer exposes and articulates are the constraints that define the position of "woman" within a system of linguistic oppositions. They guarantee that the female writer speaks from this position even as she denounces it.¹¹

The destabilising of traditional narrative techniques is a characteristic of post-modernist literature. The interplay between discrete entities in *The Biggest Modern Woman of the World* is extended to the dualism of history and fiction. The "facts" of Anna Swan's life are intermixed with fictional constructions and projections.¹² Although the novel takes the form of an autobiography, written by Anna, it is both a parody of realist fiction and autobiography, as well as an attempt to present the hitherto obscured life of the real Anna Swan. The tension throughout the text is produced by the relationship between the facts of Anna's life, the processes of historical and social elision, and the post-modernist destabilising of realist and historical master narratives.¹³

¹¹ Molly Hite, *The Other Side of the Story*, p. 6. See also Mary Jacobus, "Review of *The Madwoman in the Attic*" *Signs* 6:3 (1981), pp. 517–22. Heather Murray writes of the tension between woman as artist and woman as object of art with regard to Canadian criticism of women writers: "[w]e may see this representation of woman [as nature and secondary to culture] from the trouncing of Marjorie Pickthall to the dismissal of Isabella Valancy Crawford, from the biographical-biological treatment of major figures to, most noxiously, the debates over who is the best-looking of Canada's woman authors". Heather Murray, "Women in the Wilderness" in Shirley Neuman & Smaro Kamboureli (eds), *A Mazing Space: writing Canadian woman writing* (Edmonton: Longspoon/Newest, 1986), p. 81.

¹² Linda Hutcheon identified the novel as a metafiction in *The Canadian Postmodern: a study of contemporary English-Canadian fiction* (Ontario: Oxford UP, 1988), p. 18.

¹³ See Linda Hutcheon, "History and/as Intertext" in J. Moss (ed), *Future Indicative: literary theory and Canadian literature* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1987), for a discussion of post-modernism and history.

This post-modernist expression takes on another significance within the Canadian context. As Linda Hutcheon points out, the tradition of realist fiction within English-Canada enabled post-modern writers of the 1970s and 1980s to question realism from within the genre:

...the Canadian novel by no means lost faith in the realist story: what was striking about the fiction of this period was that the postmodernist challenges to convention all came from *within* the conventions of realism itself.¹⁴

Hutcheon argues that *The Biggest Modern Woman of the World* is one of many Canadian texts that is an “historiographical metafiction”, suggesting through its form and content an historiography whose truth-telling authority is simultaneously evoked and disrupted. The novel is made up of a series of “intertexts” including excerpts from Anna’s diary and letters, framed by Anna’s narrative. It includes testimonials from other characters, sections from Anna’s giant husband, Captain Martin Van Buren Bates’ “Species Development, or A Tract Towards Continual Anatomical Wonders”, as well as the “Route Book” of Hiram Percival Ingalls (or Apollo as he is also known), the manager of curiosities at Barnum’s Museum and later freelance manager and lover of the biggest modern woman of the world. The effect of these extra texts is to throw the realist biographical strategies into relief:

[t]his self-conscious and often ironic problematizing of the question of naming and reference in philosophy, linguistics, semiotics, historiography, literary theory, and fiction is part of a contemporaneous realization that many things we once took for

¹⁴ Linda Hutcheon, *The Canadian Postmodern*, p. 205.

granted as “natural” and commonsensical (like the word/world relationship) must be scrutinized very carefully.¹⁵

The reader, then, is presented with the life of Anna Swan, Nova Scotian giantess, from her birth to her death in 1888, with fact indistinguishable from fiction, and with the natural and “normal” worlds exaggerated and made grotesque.

The problematising of the modernist (and humanist) presentation of the unified subject and individual as well as the disruption of narrative raises issues about the construction (and elision) of traditional historical texts.¹⁶ In “Tracing the Travesty: Constructing the Female Subject in Susan Swan’s ‘The Biggest Modern Woman of the World’” Teresa Heffernan argues that

Swan confronts the tensions between the modernist defence of the “autonomous agent,” the postmodernist privileging of an “absent agent,” and the feminist dilemma of not having a fully present agent to make absent, by challenging and problematizing the literary and historical representations of the subject....¹⁷

Similarly, Smaro Kamboureli looks at the presentation of the subject within the novel in “*The Biggest Modern Woman of the World: Canada as the Absent Spouse*”, concluding that

¹⁵ Linda Hutcheon, “History and/as Intertext” in Moss (ed), p. 182

¹⁶ Christopher Gittings is critical of Smaro Kamboureli’s argument that Anna Swan fails to be the subject of her own narrative because of the extra-textual intervention. Gittings argues that “Anna performs what Ihab Hassan would call a post-modern act of translation, she crosses the boundaries of time and space to reshape or translate herself and Canadian history; she does violence to the metanarratives of linear time and history”, “A Collision of Discourse”, p. 83. Although this reading posits a more powerful character who is the agent of her production, it raises questions about the extent to which the giant can exist or be known out of context. This form of material dislocation is potentially as politically conservative as any metanarrative of linear time or history.

¹⁷ Teresa Heffernan, “Tracing The Travesty”, p. 35.

“Anna’s own difference as a female subject of discourse lies in the fact that she allegorizes the ‘surplus value’ in her culture”.¹⁸

Anna’s body is at the centre of this work, inscribed as it is by contradictory discourses. It is through Anna’s body that Susan Swan situates the issues of the historical and unified subject, as well as the post-colonial and imperial allegory, identified by other critics.¹⁹ It is through the body of the giant that Swan is able to disrupt and inscribe international and domestic Canadian political issues, and “the resulting impure, incomplete, inconsistent, physical body of Anna contests and undermines the tradition of authority and objectivity in the documentation of history”.²⁰

The Biggest Modern Woman of the World explores the notion of subjectivity and interiority by focusing upon an outsized, fat, figure that is continually inscribed socially. The inner substance that Anna desires is elusive as she remains a giant canvas. The fluidity of the text, from body to body, author to character, history to fiction, however, problematises any attempt to contain the giant body. We are left instead with an assertion of self that is a performance. Although I have found Judith Butler’s theories less useful for analysing racialised, classed and national bodies, in the case of an avowedly post-modern text where the central body is fractured and disparate, Butler’s notion of gender as performative is central to any effective analysis. The poststructuralist idea that the interior or self is an illusion created through cultural inscription and that there is no true or real identity, comes into its

¹⁸ Smaro Kamboureli, “*The Biggest Modern Woman of the World*: Canada as the absent spouse” *Studies in Canadian Literature* 16:2 (1991), p. 15.

¹⁹ See Stephen Slemon, “Monuments of Empire: allegory/counter-discourse/post-colonial writing” *Kunapipi* 9:3 (1987), pp. 1–16. Christopher Gittings argues that *The Biggest Modern Woman of the World* is a “hybrid” of both post-colonial and post-modernist practices, and argues that “points of intersection between the two critical discourses must not be obscured and invalidated by what are sometimes dogmatic and territorial conceptions of post-colonial”: “A Collision of Discourse”, p. 89.

²⁰ Teresa Heffernan, “Tracing The Travesty”, p. 36.

own when applied to a post-modernist text that destabilises notions of truth, past, history and gender, as well as the body of Anna Swan herself. The “post-colonial and postmodern privileging of process over product — the processes of construction and deconstruction of narrative...”, leaves the reader searching for the giant in *The Biggest Modern Woman of the World*.²¹

All of Anna Swan’s life discussed within *The Biggest Modern Woman of the World* is performative. I am interested in the way in which Anna as a giant performs patriarchal (and modernist) femininity, and in so doing makes the performance of all normal femininity visible, and

[i]f gender attributes... are not expressive but performative, then these attributes effectively constitute the identity they are said to express or reveal. The distinction between expression and performativeness is crucial. If gender attributes and acts, the various ways in which a body shows or produces its cultural signification, are performative, then there is no preexisting identity by which an act or distorted acts of gender might be measured; there would be no true or false, real or distorted acts of gender, and the postulation of a true gender identity would be revealed as a regulatory fiction.²²

The giant woman reveals the artifice of femininity through her attempts to be a normal woman.

In the following chapter I look for the body of the giant in the “incomplete, inconsistent” body of *The Biggest Modern Woman of the World*, and my analysis of Anna’s body begins with the perceptions of her family. As Anna matures broader social discourses are inscribed upon her body through the response to her by the wider community. From

²¹ Christopher Gillings, “A Collision of Discourse”, p. 89.

familial inscription I move to a consideration of the broader social inscription and her location within a freak/normal dichotomy.

Anna Swan pursues an idealised femininity that undermines and reduces her gigantism. At the same time her gigantic femininity throws normal Western femininity into relief, revealing it to be aberrant and flawed. No matter how many lacy dresses Anna wears or how much she is confined, she remains a giant. That she is unable to reduce her giant body through the affectation of “feminine” clothing reveals the contradiction at the heart of the discourses of “making-the-most-of-one’s-self” where disciplines of feminine inscription are normalised, and shrouded in the rhetoric of “individualisation”. As argued in chapter one, despite the rhetoric of expressing personality through the body the disciplines employed are ones that construct useful and productive bodies or docile bodies. That Anna Swan is unable to re-shape her body within the limits of normative femininity despite making the-most-of-herself with the lacy dresses shows the extent to which idealised femininity expresses specific political and cultural meanings, defining the limits of the modern woman that Anna aspires to be.

The Canadian giantess Anna Swan, born in 1846 is the first surviving child of Scottish immigrant parents who had made their home in New Annan, Nova Scotia, Canada. At 18 pounds, Anna is an out-sized baby that tears her mother’s “perineum from stem to gudgeon, turning inside out her anal sphincter” (p. 9). Born into a season of bumper crops, her portentous birth augurs well for the giant infant and the “infant” Canada.

By the age of 4 Anna was 4’6”, and 6’6” by age 10. Such expanse brings her to the attention of P.T. Barnum, collector and exhibitor of curiosities, and at 17 years of age she is announced at the American Museum as being 8’1” (p. 2) although as Anna notes,

Barnum is infamous for exaggerating the heights of his giants, and
as he bills me at 8’1”, I am definitely less. In New Annan, my

²² Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 141.

mother told friends I was 7'9" and privately hoped I would not top eight feet. I put my height at 7'11 1/2". It's an educated guess. (pp. 7-8)

As "THE BIGGEST MODERN WOMAN OF THE WORLD" in P.T. Barnum's American Museum, New York, USA, the real-life Anna Swan achieved international notoriety and wealth, yet her tremendous height, beauty and oration skills were not enough to secure her immortality. Overlooked by writers of history, she slipped into obscurity. *The Biggest Modern Woman of the World* is a representation of the life of Anna Swan, repositioning her within a historical narrative, and at the centre of the novel lies her giant, eight-foot body.

Anna's gigantism means different things to the various members of her family. Her father reads her immense size as a sign of her fecundity, and causally links her birth with

a bumper crop of vegetables in the garden... Poppa's little plot burst forth with mammoth love-apples, squash as big as wagon wheels, zucchinis as long and as fat as men's thighs, and potatoes the size of faces. (p. 9)

In the tradition of the fertility goddess, Anna is encouraged to sing Celtic inspired "growing songs" in the hope that her excess will be converted into further massive crops. This benign exploitation provides the "infant giantess" with a purpose: "I saw my growth as a symbol of my power and energy and expected others to envy me for it" (p. 11). Imbued with a sense of responsibility she attempts to practise her magic not only on the crops, but also on "normal" humans, like her "short" siblings.

Despite being traumatised and scarred by the birth of her giant daughter Mrs Swan is able to come to terms with Anna's gigantism. Like her husband, Mrs Swan ascribes "higher meaning" to Anna's size. Anna writes that

[i]t was a sign of Momma's affection for my father that she didn't challenge his notion that my size was not a curse but a blessing, a symbol of luck and hope for all us Swans. (p. 11)

But Mrs Swan is rather more pragmatic than her optimistic husband, no doubt influenced by her experience of the monster birth, and the fact that it was she "who was left to cope with the practical problems created by [Anna's] height, such as clothes and schooling" (p. 11). In an attempt to manage Anna's size, Mrs Swan confines her daughter to the family property until the age of ten, and dresses Anna at first in her own off-casts, and then in specially-made gowns:

Momma ordered my gown from Boston; she buys me a new one every year despite Janette's complaints that she is given nothing but rags to wear. My gowns are in the Princess style and modelled after the fashion engravings in *Mr. Godey's Ladies*, with fitted bodices that end in a V at the waist as well as long, flared skirts that hide my homemade slippers. (p. 28)

Anna's brothers and sisters are unimpressed by their well-dressed and inactive giant sister. Her gigantic frame and phenomenal growth, paradoxically, leave her physically ill, rendering her unsuitable for farm work, the burden of which falls upon the remaining family. While inside the cramped shanty, as Anna writes, the other children,

had to contend with me and my vast shirts and were obliged to sleep on a pile of straw before the fire. My parents and I were the only family members who had beds. (p. 26)

Anna also ate daily "the same food that my family devoured in a week" (p. 27).

The absurd picture of the delicate giantess in extravagant dress, peering out from the family hut — "The GIRL GIANTESS in her colonial box" (p. 27) — is justified to the

resentful sister, Janette, on the basis that special attention had to be given to Anna's appearance:

Anna is tall and has to be dressed right or she looks poorly...
 Besides Jannie, you're a fine strapping girl and Anna is a frail lass
 who canna do such labour. (p. 29)

While Anna is enfeebled by gigantism it affects the male giants differently. The male giants, the Canadian Angus McAskill, and American Martin Van Buren Bates, are symbols of excessive masculinity, and are often called upon to demonstrate their physical strength throughout the novel. The male giants represent strength despite physical imperfections or health problems, whereas Anna's gigantism is in itself a weakness. But Anna's height also compromises her femininity as well as damaging her health, and her great height necessitates intensified intervention to make her appearance acceptable. Anna, then, exaggerates the docile female body, and is fragile, dainty and weak on a gigantic scale.

But Janette is unaffected by such reasoning, and in a section titled "testimonials about the infant Giantess", she records,

[m]y sister was too good to scythe grain like the rest of us. She used to sit inside, dressed in silk carriage dress and lace bonnets I'd have traded my eye teeth for. You can't tell me she didn't think she was better than us. (pp. 60-61)

Once Anna ventures out into the world her body becomes the subject of public discourse: the object of intense, invasive and hostile gazes. Unable to conceal her massive frame, the giantess is an easy target for those unable to deal with the difference she presented. On her first trip to town accompanied by her mother, a neighbour Sophie Belcourt and her dwarf son, Hurbert, Anna remembers,

[a]s our wagon drew up I found myself staring down at twenty to thirty hostile faces, some gawking openly, others, in the back rows,

pretending not to gape. I was ready for dislike from someone acquainted with my faults, but I was bewildered that day by the angry loathing I saw in the young men's eyes, and the understated little smiles of contempt on the faces of the young women. (p. 22)

In the face of this violence Anna felt, "a slow and dreadful tightening of limbs which I later associated with remorse over making a spectacle of myself" (p. 23). But rather than Anna having made a spectacle of herself, it is the gaze of the public ("normals") that turns her into a spectacle. The giant Anna becomes the "freak", the threatening body of the unnatural that through its "deformity" affirms the normality of the audience:

Often referred to as a "freak of nature", the freak, it must be emphasised, is a freak of culture. His or her anomalous status is articulated by the process of the spectacle as it distances the viewer, and thereby "normalizes" the viewer as much as it marks the freak as an aberration.²³

It is Anna's large frame that leaves her unable to evade the culturing gazes that impose meanings upon her body. Anna does not simply expand beyond the normal body, however, she expands beyond the normal *female* body. She is a freak, and grotesquely exaggerates femininity.

Just as the crowd reacts to Anna's body with disdain and abuse, so too do the students at the local school. They "sneered and hissed questions about my height as I sat in the crowded little room" (p. 24), until the teacher promised, "[i]f you will only still your tongues, class, I will measure the Swan girl at morning recess" (p. 25). Any sense of self-determination or control is lost to Anna. An ad hoc seating arrangement further exacerbates the harassment, making school a misery:

I had to sit on a high stool, and work at a table raised on boards. The rest of the schoolroom sat below me on benches and wrote on their slates. My seat set me apart from my fellow students even more than my size: It made them think I was a teacher's pet and they took my shy, embarrassed ways as a sign of the snob. (p. 27)

Anna experiences the isolation and rejection at the level of the body, as "their stares made me feel hideously exposed — as if my body was covered by warts and infected wounds" (p. 27). This reduction of hostility to an experience of bodily inscription reveals how the audience (the school children) viewing the spectacle (Anna) construct her in the image of a "primitive":

the "savage" body is marked on its naked surface by signifiers, patterns, arrangements or organisations of marks, welts, cuts perforations and swellings... The primitive body... is all surface.²⁴

The idea of "primitive" or "savage" bodies versus "civilised" and modern bodies, advanced by another philosopher in the Nietzschean tradition, Alphonso Lingis, is not a distinction between barbarism and civility, but rather of "sign-ladenness", surface versus depth. In contrast to the surface of the primitive body, the modern body is thought to conceal meaning within:

Corporeal fragmentation, the unity and disunity of the perceptual body, becomes organised into the structure of an ego or

²³ Susan Stewart, *On Longing: narratives of the miniature, the gigantic, the souvenir, the collection* (Baltimore & London: The John Hopkins UP, 1984), p. 109.

²⁴ Elizabeth Grosz, "Inscriptions and Body-Maps: representations and the corporeal" in Terry Threadgold & Anne Cranny-Francis (eds). I am indebted to Elizabeth Grosz and her concise informative discussion of the theories of Alphonso Lingis and his work, *Excesses: Eros and Culture* (New York: State University of New York, 1984). For more on Alphonso Lingis see Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, pp. 138–44.

consciousness, which marks a secret or private depth. These mark the “modern” or civilised body as use and exchange-value, the production and exchanges of messages.²⁵

By feeling that her surface is marked by the gazes of others, Anna Swan is both situating herself, and being understood, as a primitive body, a body without modern depth. From Anna’s perspective the novel, then, is designed to substantiate her depth or interiority in the face of a public perception of her as shallow.

When combined with the notion of performative gender, Anna is engaged in another type of performance, this one intended to convey a sense of her substantial being. The irony is that this too is an impossibility with interiority being an illusion of inscription as, in Foucauldian terms, power produces an interiority or “soul” through inscription on the body. Thus the desired interiority or subjectivity that Anna seeks is unattainable.²⁶

The idea of interiority is a pervasive discourse, however, and Anna still pursues it as a means to express her authenticity. But she does so in the face of another mobilisation of the discourse of the “soul” where the conferring (or not) of interiority has political significance. When placed within a colonial frame primitive and civilised bodies carry an increased moral weight. The notion of barbarism has conventionally been attached to the primitive body through colonial discourses despite the fact that “[o]ur own [European] cultural practices are no less barbaric and no more civilised than those operating in so-called ‘savage or primitive’ cultures”.²⁷ When Anna is denied a soul by her fellow students she is also condemned for her surface, the visible means by which her difference is announced. She becomes, then, the subaltern body.

²⁵ Elizabeth Grosz, “Inscriptions and Body-Maps” in Terry Threadgold & Anne Cranny-Francis (eds), p. 70.

²⁶ This is an idea discussed in chapter one.

²⁷ Elizabeth Grosz, “Inscriptions and Body-Maps” in Terry Threadgold & Anne Cranny-Francis (eds), p. 69.

Anna, as a giant, is associated with the processes of colonisation and constructions of racial difference that serve to maintain the self/other normal/freak dichotomies of colonial culture, that are also fundamental in inscribing interiority upon certain types of bodies. When Anna takes responsibility for the gaze that objectifies her, feeling the inscription upon her skin (warts and infected wounds), she manifests it as illness: "I became extremely self-conscious and regularly returned from school with a headache" (p. 27). As such she takes on the ideology that inscribes her as a primitive, soul-less body. That is, she embodies the discourses that construct her body as a surface. When the normal, civilised body is one that is also understood to have an interior, Anna is then constructed as a freak.

This harassment continues throughout her life, and when Anna attends Teachers' College in Truro she is ostracised and abused both by the town, and the institution. The "normal school" is unable to accommodate her either physically or intellectually. On the spurious (and recognisably clichéd) assumption "that the class will work more attentively if it doesn't have me to distract it", Anna is seated in the hallway outside the room (p. 54).

The town folk prove similarly unaccommodating, tormenting Anna on her journeys in and about the town. Anna as freak is again aligned with a racial difference:

People in this little town follow anybody who looks different. Aunt Mary says a Negro sailor was chased through the streets because nobody in Truro had seen dark skin before. (p. 49)

The distinction between normal and freak in a colonial context is a distinction largely based on "race". Anna is treated in a similar way to a black man. The indigenous peoples of Canada are absent from this novel and the Canadian world depicted, so are excluded from the colonial/race nexus of the text. This reveals the exclusions structured within the discourses of colonisation and difference. The linking of Anna and the "transformation of racial difference into moral and even metaphysical difference" in colonial discourses, further positions her as a

freak.²⁸ Anna, however, is also a white colonial woman who becomes a freak through her size. The associations with the process of colonisation and dehumanising discourses of imperialism underscore the complex relationship between white Canadian women and Anglo-American imperialism. The association with racism and colonisation further extends the “boundaries” of the novel.²⁹

Anna is further established as a freak through her bodily fluids. As an adolescent she experiences menstruation with a vengeance:

puberty arrived and converted my physique into a turbulent mass.
 Tempests raged above and below my chin. My throat swelled with a
 goitre the size of a knoll; my central regions leaked unwanted milk;
 and my monthlies evoked a weatherless condition that caused me to
 sleep for several days. (p. 27)

Anna amplifies the way uncontrolled female bodies are considered grotesque within patriarchy. Using the idea of the “grotesque aesthetic” theorised by Bakhtin, Kathleen Rowe argues that

[i]t is this notion of the grotesque body which bears most relevance
 to the unruly woman, who so often makes a spectacle of herself with
 her fatness, pregnancy, age, or loose behavior. The grotesque body
 is above all the female body, the *maternal* body, which, through
 menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, and lactation, participates

²⁸ Abdul R. JanMohamed, “The Economy of Manichean Allegory: the function of racial difference in colonist literature”, in Henry Louis Gates Jr., *“Race”, Writing, and Difference*, p. 80.

²⁹ For a discussion of the way in which metaphor negates through figurative representation see Meryl Altman, “How Not To Do Things With Metaphors We Live By” *College English* 52:5 September (1990), pp. 495–506.

uniquely in the carnivalesque drama of “becoming”, of inside-out, death-in-life and life-in-death.³⁰

The excessive fluid that leaks or flows from Anna’s body transgresses culturally-determined corporeal boundaries, and reveals the processes of her giant body. Thus Anna becomes grotesque blurring the distinction between the internal and external. But Linda Hutcheon notes that all the women within the novel are constantly associated with a range of body and earthly fluids, from blood and urine to the sea and cups of tea, so the source of Anna’s grotesque-ness or freakishness is her exaggeration of normal female bodies.³¹

Operating in a similar way to cultural taboos and notions of pollution that Douglas identifies, the freak then is the social body inscribed as grotesque. Kathleen Rowe writes, “[w]henver the body is engaged in the functions that bring it closest to the thresholds of life and death — being born, having intercourse, giving birth, and dying — it is grotesque”.³² Anna prolongs and expands menstruation, orgasm, urinating and childbirth among others, and in doing so makes it impossible to overlook the way in which women’s bodies are culturally, sites of contamination and defilement, or at least treated with ambivalence.

³⁰ Kathleen Rowe, *The Unruly Woman*, pp. 33-34. Italics in original. See Christopher Gillings, “A Collision of Discourse”, pp. 81-91 for a further discussion of the use of the carnivalesque in *The Biggest Modern Woman of the World*.

³¹ Linda Hutcheon, *The Canadian Postmodern*, p. 112; Susan Stewart argues that “[t]here is only convention in the ‘realistic’ depiction of the body. The body depicted always tends towards exaggeration, either in the convention of the grotesque or the convention of the ideal. There are few images less interesting than an exact anatomical drawing of the human form”. Susan Stewart, *On Longing*, p. 115

³² I have chosen to use Bakhtin’s ideas, and Rowe’s re-interpretation, of the grotesque, rather than use the “individualised” psychoanalytic approach, because it addresses the issue from the perspective of “collective” cultural practices, and the inscription of those practices on the body. Rowe argues that “[b]ecause human bodies bear traces of social structures, they can be read in terms of this [grotesque] aesthetic”. Rowe, *The Unruly Woman*, p. 33.

Defined as a freak due to her expansive female body, and her discursive positioning as colonised, Anna finds some autonomy by formalising the freak-audience relationship. It is only when the normal/freak dichotomy is situated within a formal commercial relationship that objectification and abuse are contained, and she is able to “act”. Although she retrospectively reconstructs the relationship as one that empowers her, Anna becomes a curiosity on show, literalising her performance.

Despite initial misgivings Mrs Swan begins exhibiting her daughter in 1851 at local side shows, persuaded by the reasoning of Dunseith the manager of the “MARITIME MARVEL, and the NOVA SCOTIAN HERCULES, GIANT ANGUS MCASKILL” (p. 16), that “folks will stare at your girl anyway... They may as well pay for it...” (p. 16), and “you’re poor as church mice and you’re keeping your prize heifer in the barn” (p. 17). Benign exploitation shifts to commercial exploitation, as Anna’s gigantism is mobilised to generate income.

When Anna becomes the exhibition, both the gaze and the spectacle are contained within a specific site. Although there is still a violence of sorts as Anna is pinched and poked, and her sex is debated — “The uneducated often doubt a woman can attain my size” (p. 38) — she takes up the space of the freak on display, thereby legitimating and negotiating the interest in her.

Having experienced paid performance and social ostracism when attempting to act normally, Anna opts for the American Museum and a career as a performer. Faced with a choice between the hostility of the town (in this case Truro where she did her teacher training), and the exotic life on the stage, Anna has little hesitation:

If I was paid to perform, I found I did not suffer embarrassment.

There is a side to every kind of work that asks you to feel like a worm and the ability to endure this demand is why you are paid in the first place. (p. 37)

Thus as a result of her own volition together with the perceptions of other characters and the wider community in the novel, Anna becomes a paid performer in P.T. Barnum's American Museum. This formalises her inscription or performance as the freak. The fundamental tension within the novel is intensified, however, as Anna still struggles to present herself as normal, and performs a docile femininity which conversely exposes her grotesque-ness, at the same time as "playing" the freak upon the stage. Moreover, the strictures of the docility that Anna performs serves to render her invisible on a grand, giant scale rather than create the solidity (interiority) that she so desires. Her giant body is still showing.

Anna Swan arrived in New York, home of the "mudsills", in 1862 at the age of sixteen, ready to play the freak. In the process she also rejected marriage to the other Nova Scotian Giant, Angus McAskill, who had been courting her and attempting to persuade her not to go to America. Thus she not only turns away from the country of Canada, but also from a specific form of parochial morality embodied by McAskill.

At the American Museum Anna finds all manner of freaks who perform Shakespeare (as part of their repertoire) to audiences amused as much by the oddities in front of them as by the juxtaposition of "high culture" (Shakespeare) and "low culture" (Vaudeville). Anna is not the privileged and sexual "fat lady" at the museum. The honour of being the fat lady belongs to Jane Campbell: "a tall, monstrously fat girl in a crimson gown cris-crossed with pink sashes" (p. 73). At "six and a half feet [and] three hundred and nineteen pounds" Jane is a formidable figure, who occupies the licentious and excessive space of the "fat lady" (p. 73). This fat lady represents excessive sexuality, with her obese body providing overwhelming, gluttonous possibilities. As Jane said, "[y]ou can't have too much of a good thing, can you honey?" (p. 73).

Anna, then, is not able to fulfil the role of the fat lady, if only because her sense of propriety (that she adopts as an expression of Canadian nationality) prevents such an extroverted expression of sexuality. So she attempts to occupy another place, and amplify the

shape, demeanour and morality of the normal woman. But her size means that this normality is exaggerated, and it reveals that the ideal is itself grotesque, a contorted, constrained image of femininity. Nevertheless, Anna continues in her attempt to present herself as largely normal.

In an effort to assert her normality she presents herself in the text as a lady, a civilised and cultured individual in contrast to the vile and barbaric normals represented by the museum audiences and people in the streets. She wears clothes that both shape her body in the mode of the ideal, and project an image of classed morality. Although she is not the fat lady at the museum, Anna's height does amplify her sexuality, placing it on stage, making it visible in contrast to the contemporary fashion of obfuscation. Anna's height exteriorises the interior. Ironically, however, it is her exaggeration of an idealised femininity that simultaneously restricts and undermines her gigantism.

When the other performers hold an eating contest in a popular New York restaurant Anna is defeated not by other eaters, but by her own adherence to the "lady-like" convention. Although she proudly announces that, "when it came to food, I acknowledged no limiting principle. (Luckily, I remained slim because I was tall.)" (p. 76), the crucial limiting factor is her "English leather corset, custom-made in the Victorian style" (p. 76). Faced with her nineteenth century Anna is unable to continue eating:

[s]uddenly, I felt a vise clamp about my waist so viciously that I had to gasp for breath. My hands flew to my side but I could not unfasten my corset which had become cripplingly tight at nineteen puddings. (p. 78)

The corset, a symbol of concealed middle-class feminine restraint, contains Anna's limitless capacity.³³ She is physically restrained by her adherence to the form of the acceptable body,

³³ See Jennifer Craik, *The Face of Fashion* and Joanne Finkelstein, *After a Fashion* (Carlton Sth, Victoria: Melbourne UP, 1996) for discussions on fashion and corsets.

and as argued in chapter five, this is a docile body that replicates classed and culturally-specific images of femininity.

The corset is not her only affectation of modern femininity. Even when living in New Annan and Truro, Canada, Anna is dressed in fine gowns and bonnets (pp. 28 and 49). Mrs Swan ensures that Anna is able to continue to dress in style by including a clause within the contract with Barnum that Anna have “ladylike clothes (Mamma’s synonym for expensive gowns from *Mr Godey’s*)” (p. 71). Although Anna thinks she is being normalised by her fine gowns, she is in fact, wearing the clothes of “high fashion” with the overtones of exclusivity and highly produced femininity. The donning of gargantuan robes of lace and silk ironically reveals the artifice and exclusivity of a femininity constructed through notions of fashion.

The petite, restrained femininity practised by Anna is once again a version of the Victorian Lady. As with *Lilian’s Story* this body is historically and socially specific, with race and class dimensions. Anna is too big to assume successfully the contained and docile body of the lady, however, and this is the source of tension and humour in the novel. Anna takes shape through the clothes, and is defined by them.³⁴

An example of how Anna is read through her clothing occurs on board the ship on route to Britain. Anna leaves Barnum after the American Museum burns down for the second time, and travels to Britain as a member of a troop under the management of Apollo. Apollo writes in his “Route Book” that,

[t]he Big Woman wore an olive-coloured promenade dress and protected her upper regions from the sun with the aid of a parasol. Its finely carved ivory handle rested against a massive shoulder with utmost delicacy, as if the instrument might bruise her flesh. (p. 167)

³⁴ See Teresa Heffernan, “Tracing the Travesty” for a discussion of the way Anna fails to assert her subjectivity.

The parasol allows Anna's skin to assume lady-like fragility, a conceit that is extended through the juxtaposition of the finely-carved handle and the massive shoulder. Anna is at once rendered feminine and ridiculous through the fashion accessory, and thus she exaggerates a normal female form.

When Apollo and Bates, the Kentucky Giant who later becomes her husband, look down upon the Giantess 100 feet below on the promenaded deck of the ship, they see, according to Apollo's recording, "a curvy female silhouette that couldn't be disguised by the muslin layers of an outing dress" (p. 168), who "looked to be normal size from where we stood" (pp. 167-68). But it is the layers of muslin that shape her body, and disguise it as normal, enhancing her attractiveness in idealised feminine terms. Apollo and Bates look through the muslin layers that frame the shape beneath. Thus, Anna is "revealed" as a desirable ideal woman because of her layers of muslin as well as by the distance. She is also constructed as a sexual object by the gazes of the two men. The giant body is, then, overlooked, diminished by a perspective that seeks to render it normal. Anna becomes an embodiment of the ideal, through the projection of the normal woman on to the body of the giant.

It is the idealised body, then, that conceals Anna's giant frame. Apollo observes that the "giantess is overly fond of dainty accessories" (p. 167). By adhering to fashion and "dainty accessories" Anna counters the view that understands her size as compromising her femininity. The material body, the eight feet of giant is, however, obscured when covered in the trappings of docile femininity, and the donning of feminine accoutrements reduce her to the body of the fragile, dainty, "weaker sex". As Dorothy Jones writes

Swan implies that a woman who conforms with the standard construction of femininity is like a giantess trying to fit herself into a

diminutive space so that Anna appears freakish not in herself, but in terms of the expectations imposed on her.³⁵

It is through the contradiction between the diminutive and gigantic that the perspective constructing Anna as freakish is revealed to be yet another example of a regulatory fiction.³⁶ Anna's body is still read through its surface and as such she is defined as a grotesque and primitive body by the normal gaze. The much sought after selfhood (however illusory) eludes her as she remains an inscribed surface.

Anna is seemingly unaware of the incongruity of her size and adornment, and attributes any failure of her femininity to her (lack of) fashion sense rather than to her size. When Queen Victoria, aided by servants hoisting up Anna's skirts, walks between the giantess's legs, Anna is mortified not so much by the Queen's behaviour but rather by the exposure of her bright, striped purple stockings and baggy drawers: "I was revealed as the brazen female I knew myself, in my heart of hearts, to be" (p. 196). It is, for Anna, the fashion that reveals her flaw. It is not her outsized body that exposes her deficiency but the choice of purple stripes over white. Her performance as a lady is disrupted by her underwear, as she ironically feels that her "heart of hearts" interior is made visible through the fashion gaff, which is in itself a form of surface inscription.

It is not only Anna's clothing that is the site for moral expression but also her body. Anna assumes a virtuosity that is equal to her expansive body, and her speech and tone are often lofty and pretentious as she equates greater height with superior morals. Accordingly, she feels she is able to exercise a superior insight and intellect due to her height. This is merely an extension of how other characters understand her, like the doting father who ascribed to her a power over nature. Similarly, Mrs Swan reasons that Anna's broad

³⁵ See Dorothy Jones, "The Post-Colonial Belly Laugh", p. 33.

³⁶ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 141.

shoulders are a physical manifestation of her capacity to exercise tolerance and understanding towards her fellow people:

It's a good thing you've got broad shoulders, Annabelle... What else did He make you this size for if it weren't to look down with pity and understanding on those smaller than yourself? (p. 28)

It is, nevertheless, Anna that is most often looked down upon and pitied for her inability to sustain the fiction of docility.

Anna's husband also reads her body morally. On the voyage from America to Britain, when Anna and Martin are still courting, Bates bribes the ship's Doctor to let him watch from behind a screen whilst Anna undergoes a medical examination. The examination consists of a series of measurements that are taken and then compared to normal women. Bates, in a parody of eugenic discourses, develops a theory of evolution that envisages a future world populated by a race of giants. Anna is constructed within this pseudo-scientific theory as the "progenitress of the undegenerate race of the future" (p. 170). In the novel it is the fetishised vagina that is the site of most interest, as scientific observation gives way to sexual violation. Bates writes,

I changed position. I was sweating in the hot little cubby-hole. Suddenly, Naughton braced himself against the table and pulled out his hand. He shook off the moisture and left the room. (p. 172)

The image of the doctor losing his arm within Anna's "magnificent foyer" (p. 171) parodies the patriarchal fear of castration, with the threatened consumption of the male and draining of male power. Conversely, the voyeuristic Bates is titillated by the scene which is also a medical pornography.

Bates reads Anna's body in terms of the idealised body of the lady. He praises Anna for her stoicism, interpreting her reactions to the Doctor's invasions as both lady-like and feminine. When Anna keeps her eyes closed throughout the examination Bates sees signs of

her refinement: “[a]t no point during Naughton’s examination did she open them (likely a sign of a refined temperament)” (p. 171). Moreover, he reports that when Anna spoke during the examination it was in a “girlish voice”. He goes further than ascribing Anna’s behaviour to her feminine qualities, though, and inscribes her passive, immobilised form with moral significance:

None of the distal ends had a swollen or spade-like appearance that would spell a future coarsening of the countenance. It was blatantly feminine, with a pleasantly curved mouth. I noted her baby-fine hair at the temples. The ears were as large as primordial clam shells, and curiously lobeless. (p. 171)

The “blatantly feminine mouth” that is closed and “baby-fine hair” continue the reading of Anna as refined femininity, free from a future “coarsening of the countenance”. The scientific (and “objective”) measuring of Anna gives way to a moral measuring of her demeanour through her physical characteristics, as once again her body is understood to be an exaggeration of the normal.

The quantification and categorisation of Anna’s body, however, occurs within a broader historical and political context. The labelling and measuring of Anna echoes the practices of colonisation where indigenous peoples and plants were subjected to quantitative scientific study. Once again Anna is aligned with other colonised groups. This colonial status becomes increasingly significant when Anna arrives in the centre of empire, Britain.

When they disembark in Britain the shipboard romance between Bates and Anna has developed into an engagement. The couple decide to marry in Britain in the presence of British royalty. On the day itself, however, Anna is unable to speak, but her speechlessness becomes a demonstration of her acceptability. She writes of a journalist’s commentary upon the event,

[t]he amiable fellow went on to compliment my congenial manners and made no mention of my laryngitis. That I could manage my train with dignity seemed to satisfy him that the new Mrs. Bates was a remarkable person. (Perhaps the wedding ceremony is designed for women like me who are too shocked to comment on the upheaval of their lives.) (p. 204)

Anna's ability to adhere to the form of the ceremony (to participate in the spectacle) becomes the primary measure of her worth.

Anna's speechlessness is also exaggerated by her own giant body. The idealised docile femininity that Anna performs itself serves to undermine and constrict her gigantism. Patriarchal femininity requires silence from women hence Martin's earlier excitement over the passive, quiet body on the doctor's table. The association of the two female orifices, the mouth and the vagina, links the production of words with sexuality, and the restrictions and controls over female speech translate into sexual prohibitions. In *Lilian's Story* Lilian Singer is raped in part because she talks too much, and is speechless after the attack.³⁷ Patricia Parker argues that there is a link between female speech and bodies, and employs the idea of dilation to argue a link between the size of a body and speaking:

[t]his tradition of rhetorical *dilatatio* — with its references to the “swelling” style or its relation to the verbal “interlarding” produced through an excessive application of the principle of “increase” — provides its own links between fat bodies and discoursing “at large”, between the size of a discourse and the question of body size.³⁸

³⁷ See Patricia Parker, *Literary Fat Ladies*, pp. 26–31, who outlines some of the representations of garrulous women in literature and the attempts to control their speech.

³⁸ Patricia Parker, *Literary Fat Ladies*, p. 14.

In this sense, when Anna is unable to speak her size is reduced. Anna's adoption of the normal female figure that is itself idealised, does not increase her visibility or power. If Anna is femininity writ large, then her invisibility is also amplified. Anna is rendered invisible because the contemporary female body she emulates is obscured (re-shaped and disguised), hidden beneath layers of concealing fabric, and shaped by a discourse of female inherent weakness and infirmity. The contradiction at the heart of the text is that behind the layers of concealing fabric is another layer, rather than an essential being. Anna remains throughout the novel an incongruent, inconsistent, insubstantial presence.

Anna's marriage signals the beginning of a range of new influences on her life which further attempt to confine and reduce the potential transgression of her gigantic body. The celebration of Anna's body by her husband Martin and the happiness of the couple deteriorates after the marriage. The Bates' relationship is not as rewarding as Anna had hoped, and Martin's valorisation of Anna falters when she expresses sexual desire.

An essential aspect of ideal femininity (and behaving as a lady) is the denial of desire or passion as well as silence. When Anna attempts to express physical desire she expands beyond the confines of the ideal figure. In Parker's terms, she "dilates".³⁹ To compound this threat to the patriarchal figure, Anna wishes to speak with Martin about her own sexual needs, thus she compounds her digression from an idealised femininity. If Anna had been the fat woman at the museum her sexuality could be expressed through licentiousness, but because she occupies idealised femininity her sexual expression is far more problematic. In her attempt to articulate her sexuality, Anna transgresses the narrow definition of acceptable lady-like behaviour, revealing that she has desires, and within an environment where binarism dominates discursive construction, she is, then, caught within the familiar

³⁹ Patricia Parker, *Literary Fat Ladies*, p.14

opposition that Summers wrote of — damned whores or God's police — and her husband is keen to identify her as the inadequate, freakish body.

Anna's role within her husband's gigantic utopian vision is undermined not so much by her own flaws, however, but by his own. Although he claims to have "great bollocks... four inches in length, four inches in breath, and five inches in anter-posterio diameter" (p. 172), he evades the question of his penis length (something Anna has been speculating about), maintaining that the "erectile cylinder — even on a man of my height that is of no consequence to the American system of weights" (p. 172). It is revealed on the Bates' marriage bed that the giant man's erectile cylinder is indeed of no consequence. Anna writes in her diary: "I could do no more than gape in astonishment. A small nub of purple bobbed from the centre of Martin's enormous frame. The organ was no longer than a baby's" (p. 209).

Nevertheless, Anna's husband maintains that any problem is hers, because

large women have difficulty achieving physical release. The sensational impulse takes too long to traverse the network of nerves in their physique... If you were smaller, your frame would register the impulse. (p. 297)

Rather than admit to his own limitations Bates reinterprets Anna's body. Bates again employs the discourse of medical science to reassert Anna's status as freak. This freakishness is gender-specific: whilst size enhances the male it diminishes the female. Bates's earlier reading of Anna's body as "an unspoiled natural resource" (p. 172), and celebration of weight of her reproductive organs as determined by the investigations carried out by Dr. Naughton — "[t]he things I do in the name of science!" (p. 170) — is reversed by Martin. Anna's great expanse is no longer "unspoiled", tainted as it is by sexual desire. That medical science is again mobilised to support the inscription of Anna's body highlights the role that "objective" science plays in the gendering of bodies.

The claim that Anna's sexuality is undeveloped is, however, countered within the text. In an earlier rendezvous with Apollo at the beach Anna's orgasm is momentous: she "arched off the sand and her whole body quaked in a mountainous seizure... she shook and quaked about thirty times..." (p. 248). Her sexual responses, then, far from being non-existent are actually outsized. Thus Anna's appeal to Apollo to affirm her normality is clearly ironic:

Afterwards, Anna asked me if I found her normal and I said in every respect and also I told her I was accustomed to her height and it was only when we were with others that I noticed she was a fair-sized woman. (p. 248)

In his attempt to reassure Anna of her normality Apollo reduces her size. Once again the giant body is rendered invisible, this time through the inscription of the normal. It is only when Anna is the object of the defining public gaze that her height is noticed by Apollo.

Indeed, Apollo, who "fanc[ies] big women" (p. 169), affirms his ability to consume her before becoming her lover. He records in his route book on the voyage to Britain;

I found myself wondering if I dared approach her generous frame... if I scrambled up beside her on the bunk and lay my head on her chest — on those colossal udders that would befit a dinosaur — would she let me suck? Could my lips even fit about her nipples, which are the size of guinea eggs? The AUSTRALIAN MOUTH has eaten bigger things surely... a banana whole, a squash... (p. 168)

Thus Anna, recognised as the ideal woman, is reduced to food for the voracious "AUSTRALIAN MOUTH", the same coarse man who had beaten her at the eating competition.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ See Dorothy Jones, "The Post-Colonial Belly Laugh" for a discussion on the relationship between

Apollo's identification of Anna as consumable is not limited to sex as he also constructs her as an economic commodity and desires to make her available for commercial consumption. As the manager at P.T. Barnum's, and then the freelance "curiosity" manager who organises the British tour, Apollo is one of the men within the text who has a commercial interest in the exploitation of the freak. Despite his sexual interest in Anna and fathering of her two children, Apollo never relinquishes his monetary motivations. Upon learning of Anna's first pregnancy, Apollo thinks,

[i]f the baby is normal, Bates can say it's his. If Anna gives birth to a giant, I'll claim paternity. It would be an easy matter to prove Bates was impotent. Then the big woman would be free of him and we'd live off what I'd make exhibiting her and the kid. (p. 228)

Later, when ensconced at the Bates' Ohio farm and making love to Anna in secret up in the hay loft, Apollo still measures Anna's value in terms of financial prospects. When offered the possibility to make money through Anna's use of a quack tonic, Apollo quickly takes up the offer.

Fellow performers Tom and Levina Thumb arrive at the farm, peddling a wondrous tonic and a commercial venture. Given the name of "an Inuit goddess called Nelvana" (p. 299), and promoted as a "normalizing" tonic, the elixir is reputed to eliminate "all catarrh as it goes circulating through the system ending with the demise of catarrh of the growth organ" (p. 301). As such, it makes big women smaller and small men bigger thus reinstating the "natural order". Anna's role within the scheme is to provide giant validation of both the tonic's power (able to reduce even the most excessive female body), and to support the underlying notion that small women are beautiful.⁴¹ The focus of the display is the ability of

colonisation and food, and "[c]olonisation as an act of devouring", p. 25.

⁴¹ The search for beauty is a means of shaping the socially acceptable (docile and useful) female body.

the tonic to repair what Anna's will could not. The only vehicle for her redemption is loss of inches.⁴²

Apollo invests heavily in the Thumbs' venture and encourages Anna to drink the tonic, in the process contradicting his celebration (and obsession with) Anna's immense body. In his attempt to persuade her to take the tonic Apollo asks:

Anna, think of all the afflicted women like yourself who would like to be shorter than their men. Think of the joy Nelvana's would bring to their world by removing two, three — in your case, twenty-five inches that interferes with your femininity. (p. 309)

He goes on to question, "Don't you want to be one of the diminutive females our age idealizes, sweetheart?" (p309).

Anna, however, ultimately rejects the diminutive figure offered by Apollo, recognising the possibility of the final obliteration of her existence. Ironically, this comes at the very moment that she is included within the community of disaffected normal women. Anna is swamped after her advertising spiel attesting to the effectiveness of the potion by the women affirming their own deficiency (excess) through the association with Anna:

Most of them were women, not tall women, but women of all shapes and sizes. Even the courtesans in the jewels and ostrich feathers rushed out of their carriages and began to scream confessions of dissatisfaction with their physiques.

"Yoohoo giantess! I am too tall too!"

"Will my man love me if I shrink?" (p. 318)

⁴²By naming the product a normaliser "normal" is revealed to be a discursive construct. The normal female ideal that Anna is always compared with is, then, a fiction that presents an ideal female body (that exhibits

For Anna, it is a moment of recognition, a moment where her grotesque-ideal status provides her with an outsider's insight: "Why did they want to shrink when they would look so nice big?" (p. 318). But the women flock to Anna because normal femininity, the production of useful docile bodies requires discipline, and their bodies as much as any giant body need to be trained and reshaped. Anna's gigantism, held up as excessive, is the means by which the normal and naturalised practices of femininity are shown to be an act. As long as her gigantism is a massive expression of a flawed body open to social inscription and training, the other women can identify with her and revel in a public confession that in turn reinforces their complicity and participation in the definition and shaping of their bodies.

Anna is led to believe that her body is in fact shrinking through Apollo's deceit. Apollo capitalises on Anna's ignorance of renovations to the barn, which increases the height of the doorway by a couple of inches. When she walks into the barn unimpeded she presumes that she has in fact shrunk. Apollo encourages her misunderstanding by incorrectly recording her height. When Apollo finds Anna sobbing over her lost inches after the show, having become increasingly depressed and angry when her only identity, that of the giant, is undermined he confesses that she had not in fact lost any height. In the face of her misery he admits,

Anna, I never wanted you to shrink. I always liked you big. Your body has fed and loved me. A woman who can do that for a man is the best there is. (p. 319)

Anna, however, cannot forgive the opportunistic man, and ends their affair. Bereft, Apollo takes to drink and is run over by a wagon late one night. As he predicted, "the reduction of a woman like Anna is a hopeless illusion with dangers for the beholder" and proves fatal (p. 168).

socially useful characteristics) as the body to attain.

Despite Apollo's fate, however, Anna's own death becomes another occasion for social containment of her giant body. The final words of the novel go to Lavina Thumb who visits the grave site of the deceased giant:

Then we saw Anna's stone monument. It was smaller than Mr. Stratton's [Tom Thumb] but very nice. Bates had put it up with the inscription from Psalm 17, verse 15: "I will behold thy face in righteousness. I shall be satisfied, when I awake, with thy likeness."
(p. 340)

The inscription affirms the community desire to reduce the threatening, excessive body of the female giant. The pious inscription sits against Anna's own final words: "I have accepted my destiny. I was born to be measured and I do not fit in anywhere. Perhaps heaven will have more room" (p. 332). Thus, in the end, the body of Anna Swan is no more known than in the beginning, her size minimised by both public discourses of the freak and of the ideal female body.

The Biggest Modern Woman of the World, then, charts the reduction and elision of Anna Swan. The primary elision occurs at the outset of her life as Anna the giant is marginalised because of her large body. When Anna attempts to assume a normal figure the second elision takes place. Normal and idealised femininity is exaggerated on the giant, and as such the commonplace elision of women is amplified, as Anna becomes massively powerless and docile.

Throughout her life, measurement is used to affirm Anna's excess and establish her difference, her freak status being determined by her excessive size. Moreover, her grotesqueness is amplified by her gender, as the gigantism itself called into question her femininity. In an attempt to assert an identity Anna adopts the physical expression of patriarchal femininity through fashionable clothes and behaviour.

What at the outset appears to be a transgressive giant body is ultimately contained by discourses that reduce and confine the gigantism. Anna's visibility and substance is reduced by the grotesque and ideal bodies. The grotesque consigns her to the marginalised other, while the ideal femininity amplifies her docility and weakness. Although Anna attempts to present an image of herself as an autobiographical subject, the reader is left with contradictory and unreliable accounts of a woman who fails to move beyond the exterior. Her adoption of a idealised femininity is unconvincing as her large stature contradicts the very version of femininity she attempts to present. Her giant body is always showing. The fashion with which she drapes herself in an attempt to express an interior being serves only to continue the inscription of her surface as she progresses from the welts of the school yard to the lace and finery of the stage.

In its own terms *The Biggest Modern Woman of the World* succeeds in destabilising images of the unified subject and innate gender identity. Not only idealised femininity but also normal femininity is revealed to be as performative and as shallow as that of the grotesque giant. If the body of the giant, the fat female body, exists anywhere in this text it is in the spaces, the gaps between historical fact and inaccuracy, between scientific measurement and miscalculation, visible only in the periphery. Beyond the logic of the post-modern, however, this visible invisibility remains problematic, and we are left with the insubstantial fat body that is ultimately unknowable: the invisible giant.

Chapter Seven

Embodying the Nation

This chapter expands upon the analysis of fat female bodies offered in preceding chapters. I have looked at specific versions of the fat body: the monstrous, pregnant, mature age, transvestite, raced, classed and gigantic bodies. In this chapter I place these various fat figures within a broader context, expanding beyond the textual analysis offered in the earlier chapters, and positioning them within the contested space of nation in Canada, New Zealand and Australia. Transgressive, problematic, fat female bodies have a specific cultural and national context within which they appear transgressive. Thus the “limited being” which is affirmed through transgression is one that is determined by a geographical, historical and cultural landscape.

I limit this chapter to a discussion of the fat bodies within *The Biggest Modern Woman of the World*, *the bone people*, and *Lilian's Story*. These three novels are concerned with issues of national identity, and the major characters in each text have been understood by readers to be representations of nation. The intersection of the female body, specifically a fat female body, with a discourse of national identity is the subject of this chapter, and I am extending the analysis of fatness to encompass issues of nationalism and national bodies.

There is a deep-seated and ongoing concern with issues of nationality in Canada, New Zealand and Australia. Nations as well as communities are imagined, and “national identities are invented within a framework of modern Western ideas about science, nature, race, society, nationality”.¹ In colonised countries the language of nation and nationality often becomes a replacement rhetoric for ethnicity and culture for settlers as

¹ Richard White, *Inventing Australia*, p. ix; see Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: reflections*

they attempt to establish traditions and collective identities. As Homi Bhabha argues, “[t]he nation fills the void left in the uprooting of communities and kin, and turns that loss into the language of metaphor”.² Thus the nation can offer a cohesive, homogeneous space of belonging constructed on the exclusion and denial of the other.

The rhetoric of nation can be mobilised by particular groups for specific ends. Jane Jensen writes in “Naming nations: Making nationalist claims in Canadian public discourse” that

[e]ven if “nation-ness remains the most universally legitimate value in the political life of our time”... the definition of the nation can vary widely and nationalism can be used to realize many different ends. It is the strategic choices of collective actors or social movements which generate the style of making claims in the name of the imagined community.³

Thus, as Homi Bhabha points out, the familiar “many as one” maxim encompasses a specific agenda, and addresses itself to specific sectors of the society.⁴ The rhetoric of nation and national characters, too, are directly related to political, economic and historical concerns.

Settler societies have searched for signifiers of identity often formed in relation and opposition to the centre of Empire, “the Mother Country”. Richard White argues in *Inventing Australia*, that Australia, New Zealand, Canada, southern Africa and the United States, “were commonly thought of as the children of Britain or Europe, as strapping sons, or dutiful daughters or juvenile delinquents”.⁵ Indeed, the familial metaphor is often evoked as evidence of the developing national identity, and the metaphor of

on the origins and spread of nationalism (London & New York: Verso, 1993).

² Homi Bhabha, “DissemiNation: time, narrative, and the margins of the modern nation” in Homi Bhabha (ed), *Nation and Narration* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 291.

³ Jane Jensen, “Naming nations”, p. 338.

⁴ Homi Bhabha, “DissemiNation” in Homi Bhabha (ed), p. 294.

maturation allows the myths of nation to be animated. The settler society born through colonisation grows through childhood and adolescent dependence, to emerge an independent and whole body.⁶

Along with the narrative of maturation of nation is a discourse of the “becoming” of the people. Each successive generation of settlers is seen to become more “authentic”, more “of” the nation, while at the same time national myths establish the validity and heritage of the national character. The story of Burke and Wills is an example of Australian settler creation mythology. In New Zealand, as I argue later in this chapter, the Treaty of Waitangi is increasingly being located at the centre of creation of the nation. “The people” are seen as embodiments of nation just as nation is arguably a description of the people. Moreover, national characteristics are animated within a specific physical body that is representative of national qualities. This body is prescriptive, stereotyping and exclusive, and operates to determine internal and external boundaries of citizenship.

The national character is not simply animated, it is inscribed upon the body. Thus the body becomes emblematic of nation — vigour, intelligence, and strength all become the national body — the nation within the body. This body is also fundamentally gendered. Bev James and Kay Saville-Smith describe New Zealand society, for example, as

a gendered culture. That is, a culture in which the intimate and structural expressions of social life are divided according to gender. Notions of masculinity and femininity are a pervasive metaphor which shape not merely relations between the sexes,

⁵ Richard White, *Inventing Australia*, p. 48.

⁶ The recent debates over whether Australia should become a republic have been set within this paradigm of nation. See David Headon, James Warden, Bill Gammage (eds), *Crown or Country: the traditions of Australia Republicanism* (St Leonards, Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1994), and Alan Atkinson, *The Muddle-Headed Republic* (Oxford UP: Melbourne, 1993).

but are integral to the systematic maintenance of other structures of inequality as well.⁷

Similarly Kay Schaffer argues that in Australia “[n]ational identity, constructed as a battle between fathers and sons, is a battle for mastery over physical and ideological barriers and boundaries”.⁸ The ground upon which this battle is fought is necessarily feminised as “[l]andscape provides a feminine other against which the bushman-as-hero is constructed”.⁹ But more than being societies that are founded upon a distinction between the sexes, all three countries have images of nationalism that are thoroughly gendered. The national body is a gender-specific one.

As colonial spaces, Australia and New Zealand were male. The construction of an exclusive male space was the direct result of the gold rushes, and the development of industries and agriculture in both New Zealand and Australia. Both countries were colonised as apparently male spaces with the discourse of mateship providing both an explanation and a celebration of masculinity. Mateship has its origins in the congregation of large numbers of men who formed a strong masculine code, a code that has been sustained through active reinterpretation, and mythologising.¹⁰ Mateship and masculinity animated the national body of Australia and New Zealand. This code of mateship has been incorporated within the physique of the national body.

The Australian and New Zealand Army Corps — Anzac — is one version of the body of the heroic, battling, courageous nation which combines the pioneer and the soldier. Within both countries the Anzac has become the symbol of the innate qualities of the national. Not only, however, are the qualities of the Anzac celebrated selectively

⁷ Bev James & Kay Saville-Smith, *Gender, Culture, and Power* (Auckland: Oxford UP, 1989), p. 7.

⁸ Kay Schaffer, *Women and the Bush* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1988), p. 21.

⁹ Kay Schaffer, *Women and the Bush*, p. 52.

¹⁰ See Jock Phillips, *A Man's Country?*, for a discussion of the ways in which New Zealand society changed, and in particular the changes in privileged masculinity.

(problematic behaviour being ignored) but each country understands the mythical figure to be their own.¹¹

Men came to Australia as convicts and free settlers, with the myth of colonisation maintaining that women arrived second, and fulfilled roles of sexual service or domestication. That Aboriginal women were living in Australia before white colonisation is ignored within this discourse. Furthermore, the numbers of white women and white men were even by the early 1900s.¹² These facts, however, fail to undermine the image of Australia as a “working man’s paradise”.¹³

Russel Ward provides a detailed description of the typical Australian who grew up in the working man’s paradise, in *The Australian Legend*. According to Ward, the “Australian legend” is unambiguously male, “a practical man, rough and ready in his manners and quick to decry any appearance of affectation in others”. He is an improviser, swears hard, gambles heavily and drinks copiously. He is taciturn, stoic and sceptical, a “hard case”. He is also independent, “hates officiousness and authority, especially when these qualities are embodied in military officers and policemen”. But he is also a mate who will stay beside you “through thick and thin”.¹⁴

Pakeha New Zealand, as with white Australia, has a masculinist heritage. The national body of New Zealand is most often a white male one, and the birth of the nation has been associated with external wars and rugby, as expressions of valour, courage and the new, colonial man. Within New Zealand the soldier was invested with a cultural

¹¹ See John Eddy & Deryck Schrueder, *The Rise of Colonial Nationalism: Australia, New Zealand, Canada and South Africa first assert their nationalities, 1880-1914* (Wellington, London, Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1988) for an account of nationalisms that follow the war model. The elision of aspects of the Anzac experience extend to the racial expression of nation, as Aboriginal soldiers, for example, have been largely excluded from the myth. By contrast, in New Zealand the Maori battalion has a high profile and a good reputation.

¹² See Stuart MacIntyre, *The Oxford History of Australia Volume Four* (Melbourne: Oxford UP, 1987).

¹³ This is how Australia and New Zealand were presented in the British propaganda designed to encourage immigration; See Richard White, *Inventing Australia*, p. 29, and Jock Phillips, *A Man’s Country?*, pp. 4–5.

specificity, becoming emblematic of a vigorous New Zealand. Richard White points out that Canada and Australia (among others) were also understood as colonies that produced the new man, a male superior to British men. Within the international context these men (most often soldiers) were examples of "The Coming Man". In their national context, however, these characters were interpreted as culturally specific.¹⁵

Erik Olssen concludes that not only did New Zealanders consider themselves superior to the British, they understood that they were markedly different from Australians:

...New Zealand learnt from the Australian experience. New Zealand's history seemed both more orderly and more just; New Zealand society less violent. The result, however, was not to integrate New Zealand society into Australia but rather to confirm the belief that we were different and superior, an embryonic nation destined to become the Great Britain of the South Seas.¹⁶

As pointed out in the introduction, however, this difference was built along the same lines in both countries, the Anzac again playing a fundamental role within national myth-making, and national identity was again thoroughly masculinised. Jock Phillips points out that "there was a preponderance of males in the population until the First World War.

¹⁴ Russel Ward, *The Australian Legend* (Melbourne: Oxford UP, 1987), pp. 1-2.

¹⁵ Richard White, *Inventing Australia*, p. 83.

¹⁶ Erik Olssen, "Lands of Sheep and Gold: the Australian dimension to the New Zealand past, 1840-1900" in Keith Sinclair (ed), *Tasman Relations: New Zealand and Australia, 1788-1988* (Auckland: Auckland UP, 1987), p. 50. For an extended discussion of New Zealand Nationalism and the differences between New Zealand and Australia see Keith Sinclair, *A Destiny Apart: New Zealand's Search for National Identity* (Wellington: Allen & Unwin in association with Port Nicholson Press, 1986). Sinclair identifies a difference in the construction of a national character between Australia, Canada and New Zealand. He writes, "Very often the environmental emphasis was placed on the land not on the climate. In Canada and Australia the harshness of the environment was regarded as character-forming. In New Zealand it was alleged to be the mildness of the climate which allowed a year-long open air life..." Keith Sinclair, *A Destiny Apart*, p. 9.

Thereafter, the number of women for every 1,000 males rose substantially above 900.¹⁷ The predominance of men and male communities is one of the founding myths of New Zealand, and the country was marketed as such: "There is evidence that even before arriving here, migrants thought of New Zealand as distinctively a 'man's country'."¹⁸

This New Zealand national legend, built up through a succession of male dominated industries such as whaling, sealing, timber milling, mining and farming was gradually assigned physical characteristics, again similar to that mapped out in the Australian context by Ward. Phillips, again, writes of the "heroic pioneer":

He was tall — over six feet — wiry and strong, with a broad forehead showing intelligence, and eyes that were honest and manly. Manliness, indeed, was frequently noted as a special quality of the pioneers.¹⁹

The pioneer is reminiscent of the Australian digger, and shares the anti-intellectualism and focus upon physical labour. Sir Keith Sinclair wrote in *A Destiny Apart* that

New Zealanders' national self-image has been extremely physical, emphasising hard work, athletic prowess. There has been a constant demand for fitness, not only for sport and war, but in education; an affirmation of health and efficiency. Sometimes this was accompanied by some contempt for intellectual achievements.²⁰

The historical figures have reappeared in the twentieth century in the form of elite sportsmen playing the "national sports" of Rugby Union in New Zealand and Australian

¹⁷ Jock Phillips, *A Man's Country?*, p. 7.

¹⁸ Jock Phillips, *A Man's Country?*, p. 4.

¹⁹ Jock Phillips, *A Man's Country?*, p. 39.

²⁰ Keith Sinclair, *A Destiny Apart*, p.13.

Football (AFL) or “Aussie Rules” and Rugby League in Australia.²¹ These sportsmen are often national heroes and corporeal expressions of nations in the tradition of the early settlers and Anzacs.²²

That these figures are unambiguously male is significant. It has important ramifications for the way in which the New Zealand nation would be presented to the world. Again, like Australia, the birth of the nation is associated with the country's foray into international wars. The Anglo-Boer war, significant for being the site of the enforcement of British cultural and military superiority, was the entry point of New Zealand into international war, becoming a moment of triumph, and an example of the manliness and capability of the New Zealand troops.²³

The roles for white women within this masculinised landscape was limited and subordinate, and their presence within official histories is negligible. The colonial mythology has largely ignored their contributions. Women travelling to New Zealand have been depicted as the familiar moralisers or sex workers.²⁴

Canada, by contrast, has different creation myths to New Zealand and Australia. There is a strong masculinist tradition in Canada, with Lumberjacks and Mounties, but there is also a tradition of the family settlers or homesteaders. Despite the masculinist heritage there is a strong presence of women, and the national Canadian body is often feminised. There is also a different context within which Canadian national bodies are

²¹ It must be noted that the perception and status of these sports has undergone a certain amount of change with changes in technology (satellite television for example) and the relinquishing of an ethos of amateurism in favour of professionalism.

²² This is in contrast to fears about the feminising aspects of new industrial work patterns, and the perception of white collar work being unmasculine. See Jock Phillips, *A Man's Country?*, pp. 23–38.

²³ See John Eddy & Deryck Schrueder, *The Rise of Colonial Nationalism*; Jock Phillips, *A Man's Country?*; Keith Sinclair (ed), *Tasman Relations*.

²⁴ In both New Zealand and Australia there has been a considerable interest in the reclamation of women's history within the settler societies. Historians such as Patricia Grimshaw and Margaret Tennant have done much to present the experiences of women who have previously been overlooked. Furthermore, feminist academics have pointed out the ways in which women have been written out of the historical record.

constructed, a history of dual colonisation and the close proximity of the United States of America.

Canada has had a different history of colonisation and settlement to New Zealand and Australia. The American Revolution of 1776 saw many British loyalists fleeing across the Canadian border which increased the political distinction between the United States and Canada. Furthermore, the occupancy of the colony by both France and Britain problematised the easy reduction of Canadian identity into a mono-cultural one. The emphasis given to “homesteading” and family settlement within narratives of Canadian colonisation contrasts with the narratives of New Zealand and Australia. In the latter two countries these types of settlement are not nearly as visible within the cultural mythology, with the focus firmly upon the tradition of exclusive male spaces.²⁵

It is important, however, not to underestimate the masculinist past of Canada, and the role that traditional white male figures play in the myths of Canadian settlement. Although white women were present in Canada, mostly as settlers, military wives or nuns in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the images of Canada at that time were mostly shaped by masculinist visions.²⁶ The significant difference is the profile that women have had, and maintained, in the subsequent mythology of Canadian settlement.

When large-scale immigration commenced in the nineteenth century, large numbers of white women travelled to Canada, and “[e]ducated middle-class women from the British Isles were the prime targets for... appeals [for immigration]” in response to a shortage of women on the prairies.²⁷ The nineteenth century did not, however, only mark the large-scale migration of white women but also marked the beginning of the

²⁵ See Geoffrey W. Rice, *The Oxford History of New Zealand* (2nd edition) (Auckland: Oxford UP, 1992); see also Keith Sinclair, *Tasman Relations*.

²⁶ Coral Ann Howells, *Private and Fictional Words: Canadian women novelists of the 1870s and 1880s*, p. 14.

²⁷ Sara Brooks Sundberg, “Farm Women on the Canadian Prairie Frontier: the helpmate image” in Veronica Strong-Boag & Anita Clair Fellman (eds), *Rethinking Canada: the promise of women's history* (Toronto: Copp Clark Pitman, 1986), p. 99.

strong tradition of Canadian women's writing.²⁸ This is a point of divergence from Australia and New Zealand, for although these two countries were the destination of many white women, and indeed both countries have traditions of women writers and able settlers, their profile was not as high as those of Canadian women. The masculinist myths of colonisation as well as the narrow definitions of women's roles in New Zealand and Australia mediated against long-term historical visibility. In Canada, by contrast, the visibility of women (however limited, classist and racist) has resulted in a higher profile of women in the cultural mythology of colonisation.

The visibility of white women in the landscape in Canada was achieved through the production of literary material by women writers such as the well known sisters Susanna Moodie and Catherine Parr Traill. Written from their own experiences both of their texts are essentially stories of survival and triumph in the Canadian wilderness. These women are considered to have been significant influences on the Canadian literary scene, and on contemporary authors such as Margaret Atwood, Margaret Laurence and Marian Engel.²⁹

Along with the different constructions of female immigration come differences in gendering of the mythology. Howells points out that:

[t]he narratives of nineteenth-century pioneer women like the sisters Susanna Moodie and Catherine Parr Traill who came from England with their husbands in 1832 to take up farming in the wilds of Upper Canada express a very different imaginative response to the New World from what we find in early American or Australian fiction.³⁰

²⁸ Coral Ann Howells, *Private and Fictional Words*, pp. 14 and 22;

²⁹ See Marian Fowler, *The Embroidered Tent: five gentlewomen in early Canada* (Toronto: Anansi, 1982) for a discussion of the literary foremothers of contemporary Canadian writers. See also Heather Murray, "Women in the Wilderness" in Shirley Neuman & Smaro Kamboureli (eds), for a discussion of the tradition and specificity of women's writing in Canada.

³⁰ Coral Ann Howells, *Private and Fictional Words*, p. 22. For a discussion of contemporary feminist

As such the mateship and pioneering tales of the Australian and New Zealand "frontier", not to mention the mythology of the United States of America, reflect a masculinist environment that is in contrast to the landscape of feminine intervention in Canada.³¹ The visibility of women in the Canadian landscape was, then, actively developed by the work of women writers, as they charted a space for women's empowerment and growth.

Marian Fowler, in *The Embroidered Tent*, argues that in the texts of women writers such as Traill, Moodie, Simcoe and Jameson, Canada and the wilderness provided a creative and transgressive space in contrast to the restrictive and reductive landscape of Britain. Canada's "wilderness" was a place for the women to learn about themselves and break the shackles of docile femininity, becoming expansive, strong and able-bodied settlers. This reading of Canada as an expansive and promising space for women contrasts with the reading of Australia as a constricting and repressive environment presented by writers such as Anne Summers and Miriam Dixon.³²

Within the Canadian context nation is contested in a variety of ways as French separatists in Quebec and indigenous peoples challenge any claim to a homogeneous Canadian nation.³³ Canadian nationalism has also been powerfully affected not only by British and French imperialism, but also by the imperial ambitions of the United States. Separated from the United States by a land border, the cultural, economic and political impact of the southern neighbour upon Canada is profound. Often this has meant that Canadian identity has been formed in opposition to that of the United States. The difference between Canada and the United States according to R. Alan Hedley

arises out of two basic facts: 1/ Canadians represent
approximately one-tenth the population of the United States; and

and post-colonial cartographical strategies see Coral Ann Howells, "Disruptive Geographies: or mapping the region of woman in contemporary Canadian woman's writing in English" *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 31:1 (1996), pp. 115–26.

³¹ Coral Ann Howells, *Private and Fictional Words*, p. 22.

³² See Miriam Dixon's *The Real Matilda: woman and identity in Australia 1788 to the present* (Ringwood, Victoria: Penguin, 1984).

2/ the vast majority of Canadians live within 100 miles of the U.S. border. We learn these facts very early in our political socialization because, in order not to be completely overwhelmed by our gigantic neighbour to the south, it is necessary to be distinctive — to have a *Canadian* identity that represents a clear alternative to the American behemoth.³⁴

Conversely, Canada has also actively defined itself as North American in contrast to the geographically-distant Britain.

This tension over identification and differentiation is located within the body of nation, and the national character incorporates the problems of Canada's domestic and international environment. Margaret Atwood wrote that, "the Canadian experience... [is] a circumference with no centre, the American one a centre which [is] mistaken for the whole thing".³⁵ The experience of Canadianness as marginality versus an American centre (however illusory) echoes a psychoanalytic-feminist theorisation of autobiography and subjectivity, where the male (United States) occupies the universal subject position and the female (Canada) is dispersed and fractured on the objectified margins.

The opposition between centre and margin mirrors dominant patriarchal distinctions between masculinity and femininity, and locates Canadian nationhood within the national body of a woman. Sandra Tomc writes of Atwood and her text *Survival*, that

[a]lthough *Survival* did not venture expressly to characterize Canada's victimhood as feminine, Atwood's commentary since

³³ See Jane Jenson, "Naming nations".

³⁴ R. Alan Hedley, "Identity: sense of self and nation", *Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology* 31:2 (1994), p. 200.

³⁵ Cited in Sandra Tomc, "'The Missionary Position': feminism and nationalism in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*" *Canadian Literature* 138/139 Fall/Winter (1993), p. 76.

suggests the extent to which this notion of victimhood was for her a feminine construct.³⁶

Thus the animation of the national body as female is in part an embodiment of colonial oppression and mediated access to power. This embodiment of nation within a female form, however, creates a tension between competing discourses of nation and land. Whereas in Australia and New Zealand there is a clear (patriarchal) exploitative relationship between a male settler-nation and female land, in Canada this binarism is disrupted by a national body that is feminised.

Atwood is not alone in presenting Canadian national identity in feminine terms. Diana Brydon argues in "ReWriting *The Tempest*" that "English Canadians tend to see themselves in Miranda, the dutiful daughter of the empire", with the attendant ramifications for colonial experience.³⁷ Marie Vautier writes that "English Canadian re-writings of *The Tempest* are clearly different from those of other ex-colonies", *The Tempest* being an important text of colonisation and post-colonised re-interpretation.³⁸ This difference of perception between the "strapping sons" and "dutiful daughters" necessarily implies a different relationship to the patriarchal, maternal empire. The gender differences between the national bodies of Canada, New Zealand and Australia, then, has implications for the nature and shape of the transgression encoded in the fat, female bodies of Anna Swan (Canada), Kerewin Holmes (New Zealand), and Lilian Singer (Australia).

Clearly, *The Biggest Modern Woman of the World*, *the bone people*, and *Lilian's Story* subvert a variety of nationalist paradigms through their female characters. In Kate

³⁶ Sanda Tomc, "'The Missionary Position'", p. 74.

³⁷ Diana Brydon, "Re-writing *The Tempest*" *World Literature Written in English* 23:1 Winter (1984), p. 77.

³⁸ See Marie Vautier, "Postmodern Myth, Post-European History, and the Figure of the Amerindian Francois Barcelo, George Bowering, and Jaques Poulin" *Canadian Literature* 141 summer (1994), pp. 15-33.

Grenville's *Lilian's Story* Lilian is fat, unconventional and disruptive, so her deliberate positioning within the fabric of Australian national mythology — her birth on January 1, 1901, and her name Lilian Una — make her allegorical, and turn her massive body into the nation.³⁹ This feminising of the masculine body of Australian mythology is deliberately destabilising. It ruptures the safe myths that elide conflict and violence, and reveals the exclusions. The location of the nation within the body of a fat woman challenges the masculinist body at the nation's centre. Lilian embodies many characteristics of the Australian legend as well as transgressing it through her sex and size. Changing the sex of the protagonist changes the meaning of the tale, and in this case Lilian's sex changes the meanings of nationalism.⁴⁰ That Lilian is no small, docile body is significant, for she is unable to be easily recuperated within the ever-changing body of national mythology.

Another character who sits uneasily within the discourses of nation is Kerewin Holmes. Ironically this alienated, abrasive character — who is ultimately transgressive if read through transvestism rather than androgyny as I argue in chapter four — is often (re)incorporated by some critics into New Zealand national myth-making through a celebration of future harmony and unity of Pakeha and Maori. This homogeneity, however, is one of racial integration, and is a problematic androgynising of difference, where androgyny represents a concept that depoliticises difference, locating it within a nonthreatening, indistinct body. The success of such readings of the novel and its principal character as visions for the future arises out of the need to see nation as fixed and determined in the face of cultural tensions. Thus the mythology of resolution provides a safe gloss to the violent history of settlement, allowing as it does the final resolving of "two races" into one, the New Zealand national settler fantasy.⁴¹

³⁹ Chris Prentice, "The Interplay of place and placelessness in the subject of post-colonial fiction" *Span* 31 (1991), p. 67.

⁴⁰ See Joanna Russ, "What Can A Heroine Do?" in Susan Koppelman Cornillon (ed), p. 6.

⁴¹ This fantasy is the inverse of the fear of (another round) of race wars and civil disintegration. Both of these images of New Zealand society fluctuate, as one takes the ascendancy over the other. The release of

By contrast the novel by Susan Swan differs from the first two, both in its particular deployment of post-modern devices and in its construction of myths of nation. Anna Swan allegorises Canada, the vast landscape, and historical experience of white settlers through her body and her experiences.⁴² She also consciously constructs herself as an ambassador and as emblematic of a Canadian culture. Anna's "celebrity" comes through her gigantism and her role in the (in)famous Barnum's exhibition, and it is in this sense that Anna is "of national significance". In contrast to Lilian and Kerewin, Anna's gender is not in itself transgressive within the Canadian context because there is a tradition of the female national character; rather it is her height, eight foot, and status as a freak, that problematises the national myths.

The animation of the nation within specific bodies of national significance is fundamental to the reading of these three novels. The major characters of each text intersect with the national mythologies, transgressing and expanding the perception of the national body. In order to address the relation of the textual body to the national body I will look at each novel in turn, beginning with Kate Grenville's *Lilian's Story*.

As outlined in chapter five, Lilian Singer is the fictitious embodiment of Bee Miles, Sydney celebrity and Australian legend.⁴³ The fictionalising of a real woman allows the writer, Kate Grenville, an imaginary landscape upon which to inscribe historical narratives, and a literary distance from the historical figure. This distance is central to the novel's destabilisation of national discourses, and the inscription of nation as fat and female. The embodiment is striking for a number of reasons. Aside from the very obvious re-inscription of the Australian nation as female, the birthplace of the nation

the film *Once Were Warriors* (1993) dir. Lee Tamahori, and the renewed interest in the novel upon which it was based, Alan Duff's *Once Were Warriors* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1994), marks the most recent exposition of the bicultural harmonious future in favour of violent conflict.

⁴² As discussed later in this chapter, see Smaro Kamboureli, "*The Biggest Modern Woman of the World*", who writes about Anna Swan's allegorical role.

⁴³ I am not suggesting that Bee Miles was necessarily known throughout all Australia, but instead I am looking at the way she is positioned within nationalist discourses.

is re-placed, situated not at the 1788 European landings, nor on the fields of Gallipoli. Instead it rests on the date of federation with the birth of one white female child.

Many reviewers mention Bee Miles when writing about *Lilian's Story*, even if it is just to maintain the distinction between Grenville's fiction and the historical figure. Barbara Jefferis wrote of the novel:

[t]he story of Lilian Singer is said to be based on the life of Bea Miles, who may or may not have lived the same sort of life for the same sort of reasons. It doesn't matter. Nor is it necessary to know anything about Bea Miles.⁴⁴

Thus Bee Miles is an integral presence that contextualises the novel, and although it may not be necessary to know anything about Bee, she is nevertheless evoked. It was Miles's fascination with Shakespeare that resulted in Grenville's infusing the novel with *The Tempest*.⁴⁵ For Dorothy Jones, Bee Miles is integral to the meaning and shape of the text. Jones writes

Bea Miles, and her oversized body is an important signifier, for Lilian too is associated with her country of origin, Australia, in a text which also parallels colonial experience with the patriarchal oppression of women.⁴⁶

In an interview with Jennifer Ellison, Kate Grenville said "the image of Bea Miles floated into my mind"⁴⁷, and the image of the historical figure floats around the novel, even though Grenville maintains that she did not write a biography.

⁴⁴ Barbara Jefferis, "Three Novels" *Overland* 103 (1986), p. 66.

⁴⁵ In an interview with Gerry Turcotte, Kate Grenville discusses the impact of Bee's passion for Shakespeare on the novel. See Turcotte, "Telling Those Untold Stories: an interview with Kate Grenville" *Southerly* 47:3 (1987), pp. 284-99.

⁴⁶ Dorothy Jones, "The Post-Colonial Belly Laugh", p. 33.

⁴⁷ Jennifer Ellison, *Rooms of Their Own*, p. 159.

The blurring of the distinction between Bee Miles and the fictional Lilian Singer becomes one of the major ways in which the novel and character, Lilian Singer, are incorporated within national mythologies. Jones argues that

[w]ith time, Lilian grows into the massive body she herself has created, a symbol, not so much of the nation, as of national potential. Through her eccentricity, she becomes a touchstone to test the adequacy, courage and good will of those who cross her path as she is incorporated into the life of both Sydney and Australia as a whole.⁴⁸

This national potential is, however, expressed through recognisable nationalist images. The tension between the outsized body and the containing national images is throughout the text and is also found in responses to the text.

Hodge and Mishra argue that "The 'Australian legend'... is and has always been the after-image of the Australian nightmare, supplementing Australians' worst fears by representing them in glowing terms as an ideal."⁴⁹ Thus the legend has a Gothic alter-ego that embodies the fears of the nation. Gerry Turcotte writes that in Australian fiction,

[o]ne could substitute the colonial experience for the Gothic.... The colonist is uprooted, estranged, terrified on alien territory, and pursued (if sometimes only in the imagination) by a daunting predator: which in Australia was alternatively perceived as the Bush, the convict past, bush rangers or the Aboriginal population.⁵⁰

The Australian legend, then, becomes a way in which to contain the threat and disruption at the centre of settler culture, as the worst fears are idealised within a threatening landscape. Lilian Singer is an embodiment of the nightmare within the legend,

⁴⁸ Dorothy Jones, "The Post-Colonial Belly Laugh", p. 35.

⁴⁹ Bob Hodge & Vijay Mishra, *Dark Side of the Dream*, p. 217.

the fat, loud, eccentric, mad, out-of-control female body.⁵¹ It is through her apparent embodiment of Australia that Lilian reveals the exclusions beneath the image.

But *Lilian's Story* is more than a presentation of the female version of the Australian legend. Rather, through focusing on Lilian's relationship to iconic sites within Australian culture such as the language, the bush, and the law, it is possible to see how Lilian expands beyond the Australian legend, exposing the limitations and exclusions that construct it. She is indeed an Australian nightmare.

The reticent, silent male is a familiar embodiment of Australianism, linking anti-intellectualism with a "laid-back" stoicism. Silence and inarticulateness are fundamental to *Lilian's Story*, and many characters are silent. Turcotte argues that *Lilian's Story* is about language and silencing and repressive discourses: "[t]hroughout *Lilian's Story* ... it is the inarticulate who are shown to be outcasts".⁵² But this inarticulateness, and to a lesser extent the outcast itself, is often located in the body of a national character in Australian culture.⁵³

In *Lilian's Story*, however, the silence has a variety of origins and meanings, and wordless Gwen, F.J. Stroud, John and Lilian are all silent. As argued in chapter five, Lilian is positioned within a specific class discourse before she is silenced, labelled feeble-minded and corporeally inscribed with the physical expression of mental deficiency. Similarly, wordless Gwen is silenced by poverty, that is, with a discourse that provides no speaking position or legitimate expression for the poor to articulate their experience in a public space.

⁵⁰ Gerry Turcotte, "Footnotes to an Australian Gothic Script" *Antipodes* 7:2 December (1993), p. 129.

⁵¹ It could be argued that the really frightening, Gothic character within this novel is Albion, Lilian's father, a representative of the old country. Indeed in Grenville's latest novel, *Dark Places*, Albion Singer is revealed as grotesque and horrific. Read together, then, *Lilian's Story* and *Dark Places* play on the Gothic aspect of the domestic, and the horror of home.

⁵² Gerry Turcotte, "The Ultimate Oppression", p. 73.

⁵³ That this masculinity is understood within New Zealand also to embody an innate (white) maleness, however, problematises the linking of such characteristics to a supposedly "authentic" national identity.

By contrast, Duncan (whose father is in Cattle) and Rick, the athletic and handsome representative of future Australia, are not silenced by poverty, but rather through their embodiment of (white) Australian masculinity. Reticent and taciturn expression are quintessential qualities of the Australian male. Rick is not in complete command of language, especially in the face of Lilian's disruptive and threatening form. Rick is enraged by Lilian when she is filled with triumph after stealing broken tiles from Miss Gash and is tormented beyond endurance:

Rick was loud but not quite convincing as he shouted in a strangled way, choking on dust in his throat, perhaps, *You! You ain't no queen! ... You ain't no hero.* His voice was still thin in the sceptical sunlight. He had to go on trying to shout.⁵⁴

The shout and the repetition signal his inarticulateness.

Both Rick and Duncan are contrasted directly with Lilian's father, Albion, the representative of Britain, Empire and faux-intellectualism. His wielding of facts, out of context and without referents, is juxtaposed with the inarticulate new Australian. Lilian, too, is compared with Albion who uses language violently as a means of oppression. His is the discourse of authority and Empire. Albion's claim to intellectualism is, however, as empty as his collection of facts which are never connected to a narrative. His writing never produces a text. His intellectualism is a parody of thought and contemplation, whereas Lilian constantly questions the world and engages in an intuitive form of inquiry.

Although Lilian desires knowledge and attends university, she is unable to stay in the institution, as its closed prescriptive wisdom is antithetical to her own experience and perspective. The university within the novel is associated with the imperial heritage that restricts knowledge and thought. Lilian is alienated from the culture of the university which is masculine and classist, and from the structures of learning that privilege a specific type of intellect and ability. The "lecture" is a time of extreme discomfort for

⁵⁴ Kate Grenville, *Lilian's Story*, p. 46. All future references will be cited parenthetically in the text along with the letters *ls*

Lilian: the intimidating format and stifling etiquette leave her unable to participate in the learning process. But although Lilian obtained a place at the university because of her academic ability, her intellect is “organic” rather than “learned”, and to develop intellectually she has to leave the institution. Thus Lilian exhibits characteristics of the Australian legend through the appearance of anti-intellectualism (the rejection of formal education) and by her celebration of “natural” wisdom.

In this context Lilian’s embodying of Shakespeare represents (or enacts) the appropriation of emblems and discourses of Empire by the colony. Lilian remakes Shakespeare in her own image, speaking it out of context and re-framing it.⁵⁵ By speaking Shakespeare in taxis, trams and on the street she removes it from the closure of high culture and exclusivity, often to the extreme discomfort and sometimes amusement of other travellers and pedestrians. For all its considerable transgression of social norms and codes of “appropriate behaviour” as well the (re)location of Shakespearian culture and politics at streetlevel, her behaviour also activates the discourse of the Australian legend which rejects elitism in favour of egalitarianism.⁵⁶ This egalitarianism, however, is a discourse that often obscures structural differences within Australian society of class, race and ethnicity, whilst being complicit in the maintaining of inequity, for example, through the depoliticising of differences via the language of “equality”. Egalitarianism is at its most extreme a conservative discourse that, rather than disrupting the elitism and inequality of Australian society, maintains those very divisions through the depoliticising of sites of conflict (racial, industrial etc) and “celebrating” an apolitical image of Australianness.

“The Bush” is often used as a symbol of Australian nationalism, signifying distance from the imperial centre, danger and fortitude. It has been invested with a spiritual power, sometimes malevolent as in the Peter Weir film *Picnic at Hanging Rock*

⁵⁵ See Gerry Turcotte, “The Ultimate Oppression”, p. 77.

⁵⁶ See Richard White, *Inventing Australia* and Russel Ward, *The Australian Legend*, for discussions on the way in which a belief in egalitarianism was embodied within the relationship between diggers and commanders in the Australian army, for example.

(1975), or empowering, as in the poetry of Banjo Paterson. Going bush also recalls the escaped convicts or explorers who rejected white colonial society, and were sometimes allowed into indigenous communities.⁵⁷

The bush is also used in contemporary Australia to refer to two quite culturally divergent spaces: white rural communities and unpeopled “wilderness”.⁵⁸ Aborigines are excluded from both of these constructions as the dominant discourses maintain the legal-colonial myth of “Terra Nullius”.⁵⁹ In *Lilian's Story*, a novel about the Australian nation, Aborigines are shadows within the landscape. They form part of the inscription of the land but no more. Lilian, as I argue later in this section, is aligned with the present-absent Aborigines through her experience of social marginalisation. She becomes more and more like the indigene, but although she identifies with Aborigines she does not become indigenous. Despite her ultimate refusal of indigeneity, the incorporation of an Aboriginal experience of colonisation within Lilian's experience of marginality illustrates the limitations of using “colonisation” as a metaphor, as I outline in chapter one. The reduction of Aboriginal experience to a landscape within which Lilian seeks redemption and healing is a problematic subordination of the specificities of racial colonisation.

Within *Lilian's Story* it is not the bush (in the form of the people-less wilderness), nor indigenous people, that threaten and oppress, rather it is the home, the stately Rosecroft that is the place of oppression, violence and abuse. *Lilian's Story* is to some extent, an inverted Gothic, and as such is similar to the “suburban gothic” *Sweetie*. Conversely, the bush is the place of healing and safety. Lilian escapes to the bush after

⁵⁷ An example of this is the story of William Buckley. Buckley was an escaped convict who lived with Aboriginal people in the Port Phillip District for over thirty years until he was “found” by the explorer Thomas Mitchell in 1834. See Jan Kociumbas, *The Oxford History of Australia Volume Two: 1781-1860 possessions* (Melbourne: Oxford UP, 1992).

⁵⁸ See Frank Moorhouse, “Male Mythology and Bush Accoutrements” in Michael Denholm & Andrew Sant (eds), *First Rights: a decade of Island magazine* (Elwood, Victoria: Greenhouse Publications, 1989), pp. 28–37, for a discussion of the way in which Bush mythology is mobilised within the construction of contemporary Australian masculinity.

being raped by Albion — telling people “*I am going bush*” (p. 129 *ls*) — and experiences a rebirth through the cleansing and empowering wilds, with the shadow of the indigene providing her with inspiration and guidance.⁶⁰

Lilian explains her desire to retreat into the bush thus: “Under a country sky I needed to greet myself alone, like a stranger”(p. 129 *ls*). Empire, however, is present in the bush as it is in the city when that bush is a white rural community. The rural town that she visits is a closed society, suspicious of strangers, especially fat, independent and naked women. While swimming at a creek Lilian’s clothes are stolen by prying boys, and she decides after waiting submerged in the water for their return, to walk back to the town naked. In the town she is again greeted with silence and stares, but this time her nudity and bulk challenge the voyeurism and judgement. The incident at the “crik” and town reveal the extent to which violence against women is more than parental perversion (as in the case of Albion’s abusive behaviour), and is something that exists within the very heart of the Australian landscape. Nevertheless, Lilian’s body transgresses the implicit oppression of the town, her flesh being the site of disruption.

The country folk image is mixed with that other powerful myth of Australian nationalism, the digger. In *Lilian’s Story* the digger sits at the bar, in the form of an

older man with thick veins like vines that threaded the backs of
his hands and a face that had once been surprised, perhaps,
when his first corpse fell headless at his feet in the trenches, and
had never been surprised since. (p. 130 *ls*)

Lilian finds herself in the mythological frontier town, a space that is full of nationalist sentiment. It is the home of the digger and the farmer, with the pub itself a significant site within Australian culture and history. The rural society, however, so valorised within Australian nationalism is revealed to be judgemental and abusive, not unlike the city.

⁵⁹ In 1992 the Australian High Court’s Mabo judgement overturned the Crown’s contention that Aborigines had not been in possession of land prior to European occupation.

⁶⁰ See Gerry Turcotte, “The Ultimate Oppression”, for a discussion of Lilian’s “rebirth”.

Lilian says to a man at the bar, “[i]t is men like you who are the salt of the earth” (p. 129 *ls*); the cliché resonates in the face of the hostility the townsfolk direct towards her.

Lilian leaves the hotel behind, venturing into the bush proper to camp out with billy and blanket, becoming the swagman or bushman. In the bush she

hoped for Aborigines, undiscovered perhaps, or at least a secret painted cave, but I found the skeletons of birds, termite mounds, shed snakeskins, and I made do with those. (p. 132 *ls*)

This bush landscape is magical and (super)natural, and is a version of an idealised Australian land:

[m]ornings then were so good I cried, so that goannas and birds blinked at me and tried to drink my tears where they fell. The blue smoke of the breakfast fire floated over the grass between smooth trunks, and the tea in the billy glinted gold. I spent hours reading the scribbles on gum-trunks, and was sometimes within a dream of understanding everything. (p. 132 *ls*)⁶¹

The sense of renewal and purging is set within a magical landscape that inverts Lilian’s portentous birth at the beginning of the novel, where “[h]orses kicked down their stables. Pigs flew, figs grew thorns” (p. 3 *ls*). Lilian’s rebirth takes place within a firmly Australian landscape that, rather than becoming aberrant with her arrival, sympathetically incorporates her.

While living in the bush Lilian grows “thinner and browner from so much bush tucker and tramping over stones” (p. 132 *ls*). This thinner body is juxtaposed with the white body, soft as a grub that is spied on at the “crik”, and the immense pasty body that later grows within the asylum (p. 131 *ls*). Lilian thrives in the realm of the “other”, the omnipresent/invisible Aborigines, and she is subsequently marked by their environment and bodies.

⁶¹ The connotations of exploring the undiscovered land and the collection of artefacts becomes significant when read within the Australian legend tradition.

When she returns to Rosecroft after her bush experience, Lilian continues to escape the home by running over the headland by night;

The track became less and less certain as it wandered out along the headland, and I grew more and more comfortable as it became harder to imagine that anyone had been here before. Roads by moonlight unfolded like a dry snakeskin and the fine dust was damped by dew... I could have been someone slim and black, noiseless as water over stone, breathing the cool air. I could have been someone slim and glossy, in love, hurrying to my love. (pp. 137-38 *ls*)

Associated with Aborigines (or a specific construction of Aboriginality) through her bush walking, Lilian emulates without becoming Aboriginal, thus suggesting a prevailing white fantasy. The bushman, a white man who has an indigenous knowledge of the bush, is a familiar icon of Australian history and fiction. Crocodile Dundee is a fictional version of this character, and Les Hiddens, the "bush tucker man" is a contemporary white man celebrated for his relationship to the land. A recent fictional New Zealand example of the white man who goes bush appears in Jane Campion's *The Piano* (1993), where George Baines (Harvey Keitel) goes native and appropriates the signifiers of Maori culture such as tattoos.⁶² In *Lilian's Story* the indigeneity inscribed on Lilian's body through her experiences in the bush, her marginality, and the construction of her as deviant by her father, for example, does not result in her appropriation of Aboriginal experience. As she says,

although I could never be some slim and glossy black person, eyes alone shining in the moonlight, or my teeth gleaming in a grin, my feet could pad as silently as theirs over stones and spikes. (p. 138 *ls*)

⁶² See Lynda Dyson, "Post-colonial Anxieties and the Representation of Nature and Culture in *The Piano*" *Sites* 30 Autumn (1995), pp. 119-30.

Lilian's feet, then, become the site of expansion and expression of difference within the bush, and later, when she continues to run wild in the suburbs, Albion declares that she has "Nigger's feet" (p. 137 *ls*). Conversely, when Lilian is in the asylum her feet are the site of conflict and reincorporation back into non-Aboriginal society, with shoes being forced upon her, resulting in her feet slowly losing their protective coating.

The encoding of Aboriginal experience within the text is used deliberately by Grenville to highlight the link between the colonisation of Aborigines and white women in Australia. As discussed in chapter one there are considerable problems associated with applying the metaphor of colonisation to all women at the cost of the specificities of indigenous experience, and in this text Grenville resists the total conflation of indigenous and gender experiences. Anne Summers' *Damned Whores and God's Police* influenced the writing of *Lilian's Story*, and the "parallels between the position of a colonised country like Australia and the 'colonized' position of women" is a basic precept of the novel.⁶³ Grenville extended the colonial metaphor as a way to understand the potentially destructive, oppressive relationship between Father and Daughter: "The father in *Lilian's Story* is called Albion, naturally, because he is in the oppressive imperial/colonial relationship with his daughter".⁶⁴ This alignment highlights the level of oppression and violence that lies behind nationalist myths, and the birth of the new nation. As such the full subversion of national character becomes visible; Lilian's body is the site of conflict and tension, as various groups battle for control over her appearance and shape. That she also takes on the shape of another people, further intensifies her transgression of national mythologies, and her challenge to nationalist settler myths. This challenge, however, does not seem to open up any space within settler mythologies for a recognition of racial colonisation.⁶⁵

⁶³ Gerry Turcotte, "Telling Those Untold Stories", p. 293.

⁶⁴ Gerry Turcotte, "Telling Those Untold Stories", p. 293.

⁶⁵ It is possible to argue that the long history of white nationalist appropriation of indigenous experience undermines the transgression of nationalist mythologies that Lilian embodies. The point here, however, is that the location of indigenous experience within a female body that is also fat is in itself transgressive.

Ironically it is Lilian's occupation of inner-Sydney in the later years of her life that allows her to be incorporated within Australian legend and in dominant images of the national body. At first glance the mad, fat woman haunting the streets of Sydney would seem to be antithetical to the male body of Australian nationalism. However, it is Lilian's occupation of the margins, her victimisation by the police and her innate sense of egalitarianism that transform her into a national body. At the same time, the aberrant woman is located in the discourse of eccentricity, and finally contained within the trope of the Australian legend.

When Lilian is arrested after attempting to hijack a taxi, she is subject to abuse and harassment by the police. Once again she uses her large fat body as the means by which to counter and defy oppressors. The police officers ridicule Lilian while processing her arrest, and photographing her, but they let her go for a moment, and

it was long enough for me to recapture a morsel of myself and my dignity in being who I was, a substantial woman of character... I turned my back on the camera and the men, bent over, and pulled up my old black skirt, and there was silence behind me as these men confronted the fact of my large bottom in its large cotton underwear. *If you care to leer and mock, let me give you something to leer and mock at...* I had wiped the laughter off their faces, and taken back the centre of the stage of my own life. (p.190 *ls*)

The act of defiance positions Lilian as the Australian rebel. It is arguable, however, to what extent this rebellion challenges the dominant culture and its institutions. Just as the execution of Ned Kelly and the victory of Turkish troops over the Anzacs at Gallipoli are occasions of defeat and loss, celebrated as rituals of non-compliance, Lilian's location within the body of the national legend becomes a moment of rebellion contained within the rhetoric of nationalism.⁶⁶

⁶⁶ As with the women in *The Edible Woman*, who feast on each others' food at the office Christmas

By inscribing this fat deviant woman with the discourses of nationalism, the exclusivity of the discourse is revealed, and the narrow definitions of the Australian legend are challenged. At the same time, however, this inscription also provides the space of re-incorporation. Rather than remain outside Australian mainstream culture (the mythological locus of Australian identity), Lilian becomes integrated within it. The very tropes that she invades envelop her, inscribing her massive body with images of Australianism. Therein lies the essential contradiction that is Lilian's story: the fat body expands beyond the confines of a nationalist discourse only to be reincorporated within it. The fat female body, however, can never finally be contained, and the contradictions become a site of disruption.

Like Lilian, Kerewin Holmes is a transgressive figure in national terms. She is the New Zealand legend, a masculine figure in a female body, and it is this that is a source of tension. In chapter four I noted that Kerewin Holmes is reminiscent of the man alone. This is a body that has grown out of the image of "pioneer hero" and "coming man". This figure, distanced from others, stands aloof, a moral and stoic figure. Self-sufficiency, handiness, "with his tall tales and adventures" are all qualities of the "New Zealand bloke" that Kerewin shares, along with drinking copiously and being reticent, sharing little of her inner life or feelings.⁶⁷

As well as having the body of the New Zealand Pakeha male, Kerewin also embodies the Maori man, no less a mythological figure within nationalist discourses. This figure tends to be part of the Warrior representations of Maori culture, a strong, proud

party discussed in chapter three, this ritual of non-compliance can be read in terms of ritual rebellion and Bakhtin's carnivalesque. The celebrated anti-authoritarian impulse, however, is contained by the inscription of the rebellious body as a national figure. This means that rather than being a carnivalesque site of social transformation or political activism, the ritual of non-compliance paradoxically maintains the status quo whilst offering the appearance of social disruption or change.

⁶⁷ Mark Williams, *Leaving the Highway*, p. 107; See Jock Phillips, *A Man's Country?* for a discussion on the changing expressions, and the strategic national celebration of, aspects of masculinity.

and able man. As such Kerewin's physical prowess and tactical skills link her to a Maori past.⁶⁸

But Kerewin's fat body also incorporates the Pakeha and Maori woman, and it is the reduction of these different and oppositional figures to one composite body that is fundamental to the transgression of Kerewin Holmes. Her skin colour, eyes and hair all position her within a Pakeha landscape, but her actions, beliefs and associations cast her as a Maori. Thus Kerewin's body is the site of contradiction and conflict. But Kerewin's expansive body needs to be placed in the context of New Zealand nationalism and contemporary race relations to appreciate fully the ramifications of her fatness.

The Treaty of Waitangi has provided a public platform for debate over New Zealand race relations and biculturalism.⁶⁹ In New Zealand biculturalism represents both a policy and an approach which focuses on Maori and Pakeha. It can, however, minimise the role and existence of groups that fall outside of the bicultural net, such as Samoans and Tongans living in New Zealand. This biculturalism is in contrast to Australian policies of multiculturalism. David Pearson in "Biculturalism and Multiculturalism in Comparative Perspective" argues "[e]ven if many New Zealanders are unsure what biculturalism is, they are more confident that it is not, nor should be, Australian multiculturalism".⁷⁰

In recent years the Treaty of Waitangi has become symbolic of the Maori/Pakeha perspective providing a tangible and ritualistic site upon which to locate both an origin of nation and a betrayal of trust. The Treaty has been the focus of considerable Maori grievance since the 1975 land march by Maori down the North Island from Te Hapua (Northland) to Parliament house, Wellington, and post 1981, when many New Zealanders mobilised in opposition to the Springbok rugby tour of New Zealand.

⁶⁸ There is considerable debate over the "Maori-ness" of the novel as I discuss both in this chapter with regard to nation, and in chapter four in the context of transvestism.

⁶⁹ See David Pearson, "Muliti-culturalisms and Modernisms: some comparative thoughts" *Sites* 30 Autumn (1995), pp. 9–30.

⁷⁰ David Pearson, "Muliti-Culturalisms and Modernisms", p. 21.

The Springbok tour was a crisis point in New Zealand national consciousness, and fundamentally changed a number of key perceptions about New Zealand life. It also marked a rise in Maori activism, and many Maori were key leaders of the anti-tour protest movement. The 1984 Labour Government subsequently set up the Waitangi Tribunal to hear land claims and settle grievances over Maori rights to Crown land.⁷¹ *the bone people* needs to be placed within this historical context of racial tension between Maori and non-Maori (particularly over Treaty claims), and a national identity that has incorporated, however problematically, biculturalism.

Biculturalism does have many advantages for Maori, in that land claims are on the agenda and voiced, but it is also all too easily subsumed within a discourse of racial distinction and difference. Pearson points out,

New Zealanders are over-fond of using the phrase "the two races" when describing Maori and Pakeha. Such a description may be harmless if it simply connotes two diverse peoples with rather different pasts and cultural heritages. In this light, "race" becomes a loose, simplistic metaphor for ethnic categories. But all too often, racial taxonomy moves from neutral measures of human differentiation to justify schema for social inequality. Physical appearance, for example, becomes a signifier of human evaluation that signals a wide variety of beliefs about inherent differences that are intimately connected with believed or imputed cultural distinctions. In this eventuality, we are discussing racism.⁷²

The debates that surround *the bone people*, then, signal the extent to which the novel is of national significance precisely because it problematises the comfortable,

⁷¹ See Ranginui Walker, *Ka Whawhai Tonu Matou/ Struggle Without End* (Auckland: Penguin, 1990).

⁷² David Pearson, "Biculturalism and Multiculturalism in Comparative Perspective" in Paul Spoonley, David Pearson, Cluny MacPherson (eds), *Nga Take: ethnic relations and racism in Aotearoa/New Zealand*

popular belief of racial distinction or harmony. Furthermore, competition over definitions of the novel replicate the conflicts inherent within the construction of a national identity, and the expression of that identity through a "New Zealand literature". *the bone people*, first published in 1983, was received in the context of increased Maori activism, heightened awareness of the Treaty of Waitangi, and a point of crisis and conflict over definitions of New Zealand. Thus the implications of the reception of *the bone people* and the awards it received need to be looked at more closely.

The body of Kerewin Holmes became internationally visible when the novel won the Booker Prize and the Pegasus Award for Maori Literature. This had an impact not only on the novel's visibility, but also on its political positioning. The Booker Prize is a prestigious British award that carries much status, and importantly, marketing opportunities. It also means the novel is made available to (and hopefully read by) a large British (and European) audience.

The Pegasus Award, although less well known, had a similar impact. Offered only in 1984 the prize, sponsored by Mobil Oil New Zealand, was linked with the Te Maori Exhibition, that travelled around the United States of America. This exhibition was a tremendous show of ritual, artefact and culture, and has since been the subject of critical evaluation.⁷³ At each new location there was a dawn ceremony whereby Maori elders lifted tapu and invested the exhibition with spiritualism. Hulme, who was one of four finalists, won a prize that was designed "to introduce American readers to distinguished works from countries whose literature too rarely receives international recognition."⁷⁴ Subsequently Hulme has become one of the best-selling, internationally recognised New

(Palmerston North: The Dunmore Press, 1991), p. 195.

⁷³ See Allan Hanson, "The Making of the Maori: Cultural Invention and Its Logic" *The American Anthropologist* 91 (1989), pp. 890–902; see also Steven Webster, "Postmodernist Theory and the Sublimation of Maori Culture" *Oceania* 63:3 March (1993), pp. 222–39. Webster challenges some of the more problematic assumptions contained in Hanson's article.

⁷⁴ Mirama Evans, "Politics and Maori Literature" *Landfall* 153 39:1 March (1985), p. 43. Evans is quoting the prize conditions and entry form here. The other finalists were Patricia Grace, Apirana Taylor and Hemi Potatau.

Zealand writers, and in that international context the character Kerewin Holmes has become a highly visible representation of the national New Zealand body.

The significance of the prizes lies in the image of a New Zealand that was able to be presented to the rest of the world. The images within the novel become nationally significant in part because they were projected out into an international community. The task of defining the cultural and (inter)national meanings of the text became part of a national strategy of self-determination. In this sense C.K. Stead's opposition to the novel, and its winning of the Pegasus award, can be contextualised within the competing interests of New Zealand nationhood.

Unlike *Lilian's Story* and *The Biggest Modern Woman of the World*, *the bone people* is not written about an historical figure. It is, nonetheless, concerned with issues of place, culture and colonisation. This novel is, also, often read as being semi-autobiographical, which accords it an accuracy and "truthfulness". Episodes within the novel concerning racial identity, or even the location of the tale in a small west coast South Island town are read as being taken from Hulme's life. Elizabeth Webby writes that "[a]s the similarity in names suggests, Kerewin Holmes is something of a self-portrait, though a very unflattering one".⁷⁵ For her part, Hulme said at a "Writer's Choice" forum held in Sydney in 1989,

[y]ou see, I was extremely young when I started the story that became *the bone people*, and I thought Kerewin Holmes was a really neat pun. Keri win home. I learned later on that this was not a good idea, but it was too late... So what I wanted to talk about is how autobiographical *the bone people* is — and I can say immediately that it is not autobiographical at all!⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Elizabeth Webby, "Keri Hulme Spiralling to Success", p. 20.

⁷⁶ Keri Hulme and Gerry Turcotte, "Reconsidering *the bone people*" *Australian and New Zealand Studies in Canada* 12 December (1994), p. 137.

Moreover, as many critics have pointed out, it is a novel that deals with biculturalism or race relations, and thus is situated at the heart of tension over the national body. Elizabeth Webby goes so far as to link the efforts of the Spiral collective to get the novel published to race relations in New Zealand: “[t]hree women, Maori and Pakeha, publish a novel which argues that biculturalism is fundamental to the future of New Zealand.”⁷⁷

The perceived focus on biculturalism is, in fact, the most contentious aspect of the whole novel. Disturbing as the incest and familial violence is, it is the depiction of New Zealand society and race relations that has been the primary focus of critics. Margery Fee writes that an

[a]cceptance both at home and abroad of Hulme’s novel as a valid picture of New Zealand life threatens two related social constructs: that of New Zealander and that of New Zealand literature, both worked out mainly by the national (mainly Pakeha and male) literary tradition.⁷⁸

Fee goes on to point out that,

Hulme’s attempt to integrate Pakeha and Maori culture in a way that transgresses the boundary between them is bound to seem “willed”, since so few pieces of writing have made the attempt.⁷⁹

the bone people is controversial because it locates the very contestation and ambivalence about race that is the subject of New Zealand history and national mythology, within the transgressive and expansive body of Kerewin. By locating race conflict and tension within the body of her principal character, Hulme has called into question the very measures of racial or cultural difference that are commonly called upon

⁷⁷ Elizabeth Webby, “Keri Hulme Spiralling to Success”, p. 17.

⁷⁸ Margery Fee, “Why C.K. Stead Didn’t Like Keri Hulme’s *the bone people*”, pp. 11–12.

⁷⁹ Margery Fee, “Why C.K. Stead Didn’t Like Keri Hulme’s *the bone people*”, p. 18.

to distinguish between sections of the community. As such she opens up the discourses of nationalism themselves.

Some critics interpret the novel as being about the relationship between the two main cultures, the Maori, and the Pakeha. Jonathan Lamb said of *the bone people*,

Keri Hulme is a Maori and has written what is reckoned to be the most impressive novel since the war; moreover, the novel's most disturbing theme is violence between a Maori and a Pakeha.⁸⁰

This naming of Hulme's cultural identity is the inverse of Stead's, affirming as it does the "authenticity" of the text as a Maori novel. Lamb also locates the novel both within a New Zealand tradition and the predominant national concern with race relations.⁸¹

The novel itself, however, constantly obscures easily identifiable ethnic/racial distinctions. Kerewin herself embodies both Maori and Pakeha through genealogy and lifestyle. But it is not only Kerewin that problematises any simple reduction of the text to Pakeha versus Maori. The blond child, Simon, is identified as European through physical inscription (pale skin and hair) as well as hints about his lost past. But Simon, although mute, fluently understands Maori and English, and has experienced life since his arrival within a Maori community. Thus race is removed from easily identifiable features of cultural difference, as skin colour, language and behaviour are not so easily located within a specific culture.⁸²

⁸⁰ Jonathan Lamb, "Risks of Myth: the politics of New Zealand literary journals" *Meanjin* 3 (1987), p. 378.

⁸¹ Erik Olssen argues that in New Zealand historian Sir Keith Sinclair's *History of New Zealand* (first published in 1959) two chapters are devoted to race relations, while only a paragraph or two are written on sheep and gold. This emphasis on race relations is indicative of New Zealand history and society generally. Erik Olssen, "Lands of Sheep and Gold", p. 34.

⁸² Graham Huggan argues that Simon's "delinquent boy's struggle to overcome his nightmarish past" is analogous to New Zealand's "attempt to come to terms with a history of colonial dependence and with continuing tensions between its 'indigenous' (Maori) and European (Pakeha) communities", p. 16. This is a familiar projection of a male experience on to a national stage, and reflects the long-held association of masculinity and nationalism in the New Zealand context.

Another critical response to the Maori content of the novel is to question the way it is represented in the text. Again, Stead does this in his overall attempt to undermine Hulme's speaking position. Mark Williams also calls into question Hulme's mobilisation of Maori culture:

the Maori religious and spiritual ideas... are not at all esoteric...
Much of the material can be found in Elsdon Best's 1932
Dominion Museum Monograph No.2 *Spiritual and Mental
Concepts of the Maori*, which was reissued in 1954 and
1973....⁸³

Williams understands *the bone people* to be firmly situated within a specific New Zealand nationalism, and as such concerned with the future of New Zealand, and either the resolving of race conflict or the accurate presentation of its existence. Williams concludes that "[t]hus reshaped in Maori terms, the Pakeha and modern Maori themselves are pointed towards a reformulated version of their being as New Zealanders."⁸⁴ This again locates *the bone people* within a coterie of nationalist literatures, and furthermore, positions the novel within a discourse of future national unity.

As a Maori-Pakeha Kerewin Holmes embodies the reformulated New Zealander. Elizabeth Webby argues that Hulme demonstrates, "that Maori and Pakeha cultural heritages not only must coexist but can, together, produce 'something strange and growing and great'".⁸⁵ Again, this strange growing greatness is encapsulated in the very body of Kerewin. Williams also argues that "Hulme gives the Pakeha what they wanted: gods who have made the passage and been established in the country over centuries, fit deities for an anti-nuclear ethos."⁸⁶

⁸³ Mark Williams, *Leaving the Highway*, p. 99.

⁸⁴ Mark Williams, *Leaving the Highway*, p. 104.

⁸⁵ Elizabeth Webby, "Keri Hulme Spiralling to Success", p. 19.

⁸⁶ Mark Williams, *Leaving the Highway*, p. 102.

As such the outsized body of Kerewin Holmes is at the forefront of nationalism, but it is a nationalism that reflects a specific Pakeha vision. Ruth Brown points out the limitations of the spiritualism of the novel, arguing that the (pre-Christian) spiritualism offered by the Kaumatua to Joe is essentially conservative and passive, and

the stolid educated middle-class people who buy Booker-Prize books, can be comfortable with a spirituality that asks them merely to wait, hope and preserve some undefined “precious matters” — perhaps by subscribing to a Maori heritage museum?⁸⁷

Any threat from Maori activism is neatly contained within a sanitised heritage that is essentially depoliticised. Within this context Kerewin’s body, too, is neutralised, and becomes a safe embodiment of a New Zealand that will develop sometime in the future.

The projection of future harmony is interesting within a post-colonial context, as it represents a particular Pakeha and nationalist gloss on both the end of the novel, and the vision offered by the novel. Linked with the tendency to read Kerewin Holmes as androgynous, as argued in chapter four, is a desire to contain the novel within the net of a post-colonial utopia. But, as Lamb says “as long as groups in New Zealand are in competition for authentication myths, the threat of terror exists”, and this is the threat contained in the terrifying fat body of Kerewin.⁸⁸

The body of Kerewin Holmes, then, is located within several important nationalist discourses. She is both Maori and Pakeha, she is both male and female (especially according to the androgynous readings) and she crosses class boundaries. Moreover, she blurs the distinctions between male and female writing (a distinction well established within the New Zealand tradition) by setting the international within the national, the small-town, semi-rural district becoming analogous to New Zealand. As such the threat to the national masculinist Pakeha body is relieved by a reinterpretation of Kerewin’s body

⁸⁷ Ruth Brown, “Maori Spirituality as Pakeha Construct”, p. 253.

⁸⁸ Jonathan Lamb, “Risks of Myth”, p. 384.

as fitting the mythology, and representing contemporary and future New Zealand. This comfortable reading, however, is disrupted by the image of the woman herself expanding beyond the body of Pakeha nationalism.

In *Lilian's Story* the fat transgressive body of Lilian Singer also inverts national myths, and locates the birth of nation "elsewhere". But Lilian is also contained within those nationalist discourses, especially re-read as it is within the latest wave of republicanism. She is caught up within another re-invention of past, and as such her transgression and physical challenge is recuperated within the trope of the national legend.

the bone people, though, is not so easily contained within projections of a harmonious New Zealand. By the same token it is difficult for the novel to be easily subsumed by Maori groups who may wish to mobilise it as an image of Maori future.⁸⁹ Kerewin's body remains fat with the promise of insight and resolution, but she is also brimming over with ambivalence and contradiction. The transvestite figure remains out of reach, the expression of discomfort and distress, as well as hope and possibility.

In the Canadian novel *The Biggest Modern Woman of the World*, Anna Swan, like Kerewin Holmes and Lilian Singer, is a transgressive figure who embodies elements of national identity within her massive frame. The nature of her transgression, however, is in contrast to that of the two other women.

The profile of women in Canadian mythology and heritage is reasonably high, and the tradition of female autobiography is firmly established. The place of women within the mythology of colonisation is significantly different to New Zealand and Australia. Importantly the gendering of the national body differs so that in a Canadian context a legitimate national body can be female. *The Biggest Modern Woman of the*

⁸⁹ Jonathan Lamb in "Risks of Myth" distinguishes between four distinct political and literary groups within New Zealand: radical Maori, moderate Maori and liberal Pakeha, common-sense old-style nationalists, and post-modernists. According to Lamb each faction is competing over the meanings and significance accorded to cultural texts, historical events and literary works, pp. 378–79.

World is written in the form of a diary and autobiography, and is, then, part of a Canadian national literary tradition, taking its form from the tradition of pioneering women writers. The character of Anna Swan is, thus, firmly located within the Canadian nation both as an historical figure and as an embodiment of Canada.

Dorothy Jones points out that *The Biggest Modern Woman of the World* “employs quite specific political allegory, identifying the giant Anna both with the colonial terrain of Canada and the situation of women in general.”⁹⁰ Smaro Kamboureli, for her part, argues that Anna Swan is an embodiment of the Canadian landscape:

[a]s a Canadian woman, Anna becomes an allegory imaging the vast Canadian landscapes, her personal difficulties depicting the problems of pioneers as represented in the novel by her parents. The allegorization of Canada as woman evokes female passivity, a passivity which is played out in the sexual politics of Anna’s life. As a woman with an immense body, Anna allegorizes female otherness and the ways in which it threatens man’s confidence in his phallogocentric power.⁹¹

Instead of leaving Anna’s vast frame as allegorical of the territory of Canada, I want to look at the way she embodies not only the Canadian landscape, but also the Canadian nation, and the tension this creates within the novel as it disrupts the dichotomy of masculinist nation and feminine land.

As argued earlier it is not unusual for the Canadian nation to be represented as female, the dutiful daughter of empire.⁹² Anna Swan embodies the Canadian nation in two distinct ways. Firstly, through understanding herself to be a representative of Canada, speaking for Canada; and secondly, through her behaviour and relationships. She lives Canadian international relations.

⁹⁰ Dorothy Jones, “The Post-Colonial Belly Laugh”, p. 31.

⁹¹ Smaro Kamboureli, “*The Biggest Modern Woman of the World*”, p. 9.

⁹² Richard White, *Inventing Australia*, p. 48.

Anna announces her representation of Canada early on in *The Biggest Modern Woman of the World*, partly in an attempt to convince the reader of the importance of her life. When she meets with P.T. Barnum, the owner of the American Museum (who is a physical manifestation of the free-enterprise, entrepreneurial United States) at the onset of her performance career, Anna makes a speech. She feels compelled to defend Canada in the face of ignorance and prejudice as Barnum is concerned that Canadians are infectious (p. 69 *bmw*):

[a]llow me to clear up a few misconceptions about the Canadas, which are thought to be a technically backward dominion, important only as a massive exporter of wheat and timber.

Contrary to the opinion of the rest of the world, which sees us as a backwater of medical research, the development of cough suppressors is a major scientific field in my country as well as a philosophical principle.⁹³

Anna's spiel, however, is fraught with contradiction. As Kamboureli points out, Anna's "young female voice is totally consumed by the male rhetoric she employs".⁹⁴ Nevertheless she is attempting to counter prevailing American attitudes about Canada.⁹⁵

That the Canadian national body is gendered female has important ramifications for the relationship between Canada and other nations. As Robin Mathews points out in *Canadian Identity*,

Canadians most often think of government as a humanitarian leader at best and a serious arbitrator between humanitarian and

⁹³ Susan Swan, *The Biggest Modern Woman of the World*, p. 69. All future references will be cited parenthetically in the text along with the letters *bmw*.

⁹⁴ Smaro Kamboureli, "The Biggest Modern Woman of the World", p. 7.

⁹⁵ When Margaret Atwood travelled to the United States of America to study at Harvard she was surprised by the lack of knowledge about Canada: "[i]t's not that the Americans I met had any odd or 'upsetting'

free enterprise forces, at worst. That is one of the reasons Canadians are often described by Americans as docile, too accepting of authority, too willing to accept government dictates.⁹⁶

The docility is in this case associated with a particular political approach. That humanitarian functions of government are read as testimony to the docility of a nation is in itself interesting; however, it also suggests how the Canadian nation is invested with a patriarchal (and classed) femininity. "Docility", as I have argued throughout this thesis, has specific meanings when placed within a patriarchal gendered discourse, and in this case femininity is associated with a soft politics in contrast to hard "rationalist" politics. This compares with *Lilian's Story* where Lilian's body is outsized in patriarchal terms. Just as Anna is enfeebled by gigantism, the potential national power of a Canadian nation-state is compromised not only by its largeness but also by the gendering of the country as female.

It is Anna's gigantism rather than her femininity that transgresses the national body. Just as Anna is an outsized woman who exaggerates patriarchal femininity, she is also the logical extension (or inflation) of the myths of Canadian women. Even her experience of maternity, with the loss of both of her babies at birth, identifies her with the experiences of the early White-Canadian settlers. She says after the death of her daughter,

[t]he giant [Martin] has been kind, and far more loving than I have any right to expect, doing and saying all that he can to make me feel that I have not failed although that is exactly how I do feel: female and flawed. (p. 242 *bmw*)

Anna's morality is also a measure of her Canadianness as it exaggerates a morality popularly understood to be specifically Canadian. The notion of a Canadian compassion

attitudes at all. They had a vague idea that such a place existed — it was that blank area north of the map where the bad weather came from", Coral Ann Howells, *Margaret Atwood*, p. 3.

as discussed by Robin Mathews in *Canadian Identity*, is an example of the location of those national characteristics within the bodies of people in the nation.⁹⁷ Moreover, according to Karen Dubinsky there is an historic concern with Canada's international "moral reputation".⁹⁸

The Biggest Modern Woman of the World differs from *Lilian's Story* and *the bone people* in that Anna embodies a recognisable and legitimate version of Canadian identity as the female national figure is historically and contemporarily familiar. Her transgression of nationalism, then, does not lie in her gender as it does with Lilian and Kerewin (nor race as with Kerewin), but instead is located in her exaggerated representation of nationalism. Her body expands beyond a national Canadian identity through her size which amplifies the character to a point where the conventions and assumptions cannot hold it. The femaleness of her body becomes transgressive through its massive proportions: her "monster opening" (p. 37 *bmw*), "those breasts of hers, like loaves of bread hiding under scented silk, ready to be squeezed and sampled" (p. 176 *bmw*), and even her ankle bone that is "the size of an ostrich egg" (p. 247 *bmw*). As a woman embodying Canadianness Anna Swan is part of a settler tradition; however, as a giant she stretches the female body beyond the familiar dimensions of the national figure. Anna Swan's transgression, then, is not that she does not embody the traditional, popular Canadian character, but that she does, to excess.

⁹⁶ Robin Mathews, *Canadian Identity: major forces shaping the life of a people* (Ottawa: Steel Rail, 1988), p. 5.

⁹⁷ Robin Mathews, *Canadian Identity*, p. 4.

⁹⁸ Karen Dubinsky, "'Maidenly Girls' or 'Designing Women'?", in Franca Iacovetta & Mariana Valverde, identifies a particular understanding of Canadian femininity as fundamental to law making. Karen Dubinsky cites the example of John Charlton (member of parliament 1872-1904) who was concerned with Canada's international "moral reputation", and his paternalist legislation that was intended to maintain the moral purity of Canadian women. She also writes about the historical tendency to mobilise a particular image of Canada's "purer moral atmosphere" in response to serious crime in Britain and the United States. The border between the United States and Canada has historically also been the site of potential cultural contamination with the perception that the United States' "depravity" leaks across to

Docility and passivity, as Kamboureli points out, are characteristics of Anna's relationships with others, specifically with her lovers and husband. As argued in chapter six, Anna's attempted embodiment of normal femininity results in the reduction and containment of her body. Anna's embodiment of decorum, docility and refinement as Canadian characteristics affects her relationship with the masculinist body of the United States.

Like Grenville, Swan uses the metaphor of colonisation to explore the experience of white women within patriarchal societies. Anna and Canada are both colonies.⁹⁹ Moreover, like *Lilian's Story*, the Aboriginal people are an absence in the novel. This is a significant silence in a novel that is about nation and national identity. Anna embodies the celebrated qualities of Canadian identity; these characteristics are classed and raced. Although Christopher Gillings argues that

Susan Swan writes out of a multicultural and liminal space between the immigrant worlds of the old country and the new where, contemporaneously, French, native languages, German, Slavic, Japanese, Italian, Hindi, and a multiplicity of other languages interact with Canada's regional *englishes* to generate a polyphonic national discourse....¹⁰⁰

I am not entirely convinced that the tendency to universalise colonial experience is offset by, for example, "Anna's transposition and adaptation of the Gaelic ballad to a Canadian context".¹⁰¹ This again reveals the problems associated with using colonisation as a metaphor to explain (white) women's experiences. Not only are experiences of racism

the supposedly morally purer Canada. This underscores the way in which a sense of Canadianness was constructed in opposition to the presence of the dominant neighbour, p. 33

⁹⁹ Beryl Langer writes that the United States "produced its own form of imperialism — 'Coca-Cola-nisation' — which is rapidly assuming the status of global culture". "The Real Thing: Cliff Hardy and Cocacola-nisation" *Span* 31 February (1991), p. 29.

¹⁰⁰ Christopher Gittings, "A Collision of Discourse", p. 88.

¹⁰¹ Christopher Gittings, "A Collision of Discourse", p. 88.

subsumed within a gendered colonisation but the marginalisation is replicated at the same time as it is evoked. When Anna is successful in inscribing herself as the ideal woman (Canadianness personified) issues of indigeneity are invisible. When Anna is constructed as a freak the experience of oppression and colonisation is located within her frame: the outsized body of a white woman.

As a body that is identified “both with the colonial terrain of Canada and the situation of women in general”, or which allegorises the “surplus value” of her culture, Anna Swan invokes a particular image of colonial landscape of Canada.¹⁰² Heather Murray sounds a note of caution about what she calls the “city/pseudo-wilderness/wilderness continuum” of English-Canadian writing which contrasts with frontier mythologies of other countries. She writes that,

the English-Canadian myth (in which the wilderness and its attendant freedoms are connected, however tenuously, to the civilized) asserts the ultimate accessibility of the wilderness state of mind. It is a myth of community, and ostensibly radically democratic. But insofar as it is a myth, and further, a myth which suggests that we may enact imaginatively those experiences we are prohibited in actuality, we must ask to what extent it is liberating and integrative in its utopianism, to what degree co-optive and deceptive in its glossing of real oppressions and contradictions.¹⁰³

To this extent the body of the giant as representative of a broader experience of oppression needs to be treated with caution.

In *The Biggest Modern Woman of the World* the search for identity and Anna's choice to embody patriarchal femininity makes her complicit in the colonial relationship

¹⁰² Dorothy Jones, “The Post-Colonial Belly Laugh”, p. 31 and Smaro Kamboureli, “*The Biggest Modern Woman of the World*”, p. 15 respectively.

between Canada and Britain and The United States.¹⁰⁴ Anna's relationships with the Americans, P.T. Barnum, The Kentucky Giant and the "mudsill" audiences are contradictory. Anna is large and imposing, as she, for example, finds it difficult to contain her massive voice and skirts. At the same time Anna is a freak and on show, caught up within a social contract that affirms the normality of others through the display of her body. As well as confirming the individual normality of the audience, Anna, however, also confirms (for the audience) the normality of American society through the presentation of the aberrant Canada.

Anna also confirms the normality of the British audiences and Royalty (and by extension the social and political system) when she travels to Britain with a performance troupe. Returning to the bizarre scene where the British Queen walks between Anna's legs, Anna and Canada again become the measure of abnormality, the measure against which, in this case, Britain's superiority and culture is affirmed. Britain is, of course, animated as the maternal empire — the mother country — however, this image of mother is infused with the power and control of empire. Anna's giant frame embodies the grotesque that allows contrasting bodies and behaviours to be typed normal, and moreover, her embodiment of Canadian morality leaves her defenceless. Queen Victoria is extremely short and exercises a "disproportionate" amount of power over the expansive empire that Anna represents. Anna's disproportionate body, her extreme height and small head (p. 57 *bmw*), is abnormality in the face of the normalised disproportion of the British Empire and the Queen.

Not only is Anna positioned as freak and exotic colonial object within the Royal household, but she is also shocked by conditions outside the Royal enclaves and their careless response to that poverty (p. 214 *bmw*). The disparity between the wealth and poverty she witnesses is contrasted with a specific vision of Canada, which, along with

¹⁰³ Heather Murray, "Women in the Wilderness" in Shirley Neuman & Smaro Kamboureli (eds), p. 76 and p. 77.

¹⁰⁴ Beryl Langer argues in "The Real Thing" that cultural hegemony "depends on the consent of the colonised", p. 32.

the other colonies, was perceived to be a more healthy, prosperous and egalitarian place than Britain. Moreover, as well as growing larger, more athletic bodies the colonial people are more open and friendly. Apollo records in his diary that the giantess despairs of those in Britain: “she was discouraged with the Brits who are polite on the outside but cruel underneath” (p. 218 *bmw*).

Despite her misgivings about the British society and the Royal family, when Anna marries the Kentucky Giant she does so in Britain. As well as suggesting issues of territorialism, the marriage enacts the political identification of Canada with the United States, and distancing from Britain. The marriage, however, does take place within the landscape of imperialism.

The relationship between Martin and Anna is both a physical embodiment of the relationship between Canada and the United States as well as a parody of that relationship, enacting both the geographical size and proximity of the two countries.¹⁰⁵ Just as Anna represents a feminised Canadian nationalism, Martin represents the masculinised United States. As argued in chapter six, this masculinity is problematised through Martin’s fallibility. Martin relies upon discourses of science and medicine to maintain his superiority over Anna, his assertion of the primacy of giants, and his deconstructing of Anna’s frame. The constant contradiction of fact and figures within the text, and his impotence, thoroughly undermine his masculinity, as it is a masculinity that is predicated on dominance through size and physical superiority.

Anna’s reliance upon Canadian national behaviours such as “decorum” position her international context as reduced and docile. Her ability to defend herself against the abuses of British and United States cultures are limited. There is always the moral high-ground, however, and Anna exhibits the belief of her own superior moralism in the face of American lack of civilisation and British inequity. Surrounded by the “mudsills” she

¹⁰⁵ Similar pro-Canadian nationalism and anti-American imperialism is found in a number of Margaret Atwood novels such as *Surfacing* and *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Susan Swan attempts to undermine any sense of appeal associated with such a close relationship with the United States.

identifies her superiority with her height, with perspective and proportion being embodied in her. Nevertheless she is sure that her gigantic superiority is also Canadian.

One further dimension of the character of Anna Swan that finally locates her within a Canadian body is her problematic and limited subjectivity. Anna encounters the difficulty of women attempting to write an autobiography through patriarchal narrative structures, with these structures militating against the expression of the feminine by definition.¹⁰⁶ Added to this is Anna's inability to distinguish between her private and public selves. Furthermore, the very (post-modern) intertextuality of the novel fractures the autobiographical narrative, and Anna's personal history is disrupted by Susan Swan's fictional intervention in the form of "other" texts. Ultimately Anna is unable to retain control over the narrative and demonstrate her subjectivity. This reflects a history of Canadian national identity that is fractured and contested. The image of many peoples within one country is nicely embodied by a giantess that is herself fractured and contradictory.¹⁰⁷

Anna Swan embodies a Canadian national figure through intention and allegory. Her embodiment of this national figure is not, however, transgressive in itself, as the female national body is familiar within Canadian heritage. But the female body expanded to the size of a giant is transgressive, and the decorum, docility and moralism of Canada is out of proportion attached as it is to the eight-foot Anna Swan. Her size amplifies the constraints embodied within the national figure, and the limitations of a Canadian nationalism expressed through a docile body.

¹⁰⁶ See Sidone Smith, *Subjectivity, Identity, and the Body: women's autobiographical practices in the twentieth century* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1993) and Helen M. Buss, *Mapping Ourselves: Canadian women's autobiography in English Canada* (Montreal, Kingston, London, Buffalo: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994); Catherine Belsey, "Constructing the Subject: Deconstructing the Text" in Judith Newton & Deborah Rosenflet (eds), *Feminist Criticism and Social Change: sex, class and race in literature and culture* (New York & London: Methuen, 1985).

¹⁰⁷ See Teresa Heffernan, "Tracing the Travesty" and Smaro Kamboureli, "The Biggest Modern Woman of the World".

The three novels *Lilian's Story*, *the bone people* and *The Biggest Modern Woman of the World* are about national characters. At the centre of each novel is a body that is shaped in cultural terms, a body that resonates within a specific cultural and historical context. The major difference between the novels is that the bodies of Lilian and Kerewin are transgressive and threatening bodies because of their sex whereas Anna's body is itself an embodiment of both Canadian idealised femininity and Canadian nationalism.

The national bodies of New Zealand and Australia have been gendered male in a colonial heritage that valorises the role of white men. Within such a context the displacement of the masculinist centre through the female bodies of Lilian and Kerewin, and their allegorical embodiment of national character, is transgressive and challenging. When *the bone people* is read as a novel about a future utopic bicultural New Zealand, or Lilian is interpreted as a great (if eccentric) national character, the transgression of the (re)gendering of the national body is underestimated, by minimising the texts or recuperating them within a nationalist pantheon. But even so Kerewin and Lilian disturb the national image, locating the nation in the expansive female body.

The issues for *The Biggest Modern Woman of the World* are necessarily different, as the visibility of women within the Canadian colonial past, and the feminising of the national body means that the sexed body of Anna Swan is in itself not transgressive. The transgression is instead located in the fatness of the body. Anna Swan exaggerates the feminine aspects of the Canadian national character and femininity through her gigantism. This hugeness makes it impossible to ignore the limitations of the national version of female-gendered body, and the roles available for women.

These three novels together reveal the extent to which dominant discourses of nationalism within settler and post-colonial countries reflect colonial myths that promote exclusive bodies of national significance. At the same time these myths obscure other versions of national bodies. Lilian Singer, Kerewin Holmes and Anna Swan are fat, and they expand beyond the limited spaces of a national body to redefine, reshape and reclaim a legitimacy for *other* bodies.

Conclusion

Women and Fatness

Bodies, their shapes, and sizes are an integral part of how the societies of Australia, New Zealand and Canada, and Western societies in general construct meaning. The body is subject to all manner of cultural intervention, interpretation and judgement. By looking at the fat female body, the various ways in which it is defined, interpreted and positioned discursively, it is possible to see how relationships of power, and cultural mythologies, are naturalised and maintained.

Contemporary cults of slenderness and diet-obsession speak of cultural anxieties about female fatness. These anxieties are linked to a system that constructs useful bodies for capitalist production and consumption. It is also fundamental to so-called first-world societies where excess and surplus have become issues of morality rather than survival. Responses to fat female bodies are much more than mere expressions of distaste or medical concern. That these first-world or Western responses to fat women are intersected by specific cultural and ethnic factors, which are themselves historically constituted, further complicates any simple reduction of fatness to morality or culture.

The aim of this thesis was to chart different versions of the fat body. The incorporation of monstrous, pregnant, mature-aged, cross-dressing, overweight, and gigantic bodies within the pantheon of fatness allows not only an appreciation of the complexities of fatness and the female body, but is also the means to make visible the processes of social inscription, and subsequent transgressions of it. The women characters featured all transgress social-cultural expectations of behaviour through their bodies; moreover, the body itself is revealed to be the site of contestation.

I chose to look for the fat body in literature and film, specifically those about women, to illuminate the practices of shaping bodies that are part of the everyday. Literary and film bodies are subject to similar discursive construction as “actual” or lived

bodies. The location of fat women in New Zealand, Australia and Canada provides a space to explore another dimension of fatness, that constructed by colonial practices and nationalist endeavour. If bodies become fat through expansion beyond dominant discourses that define and limit the expression of femininity, then they also become fat in the contested spaces of colony and (post-colonial) nation.

In chapter one I outlined the contemporary issues associated with women and fatness, and offered a post-structural theory of bodily inscription as a means to understand the various meanings attributed to the fat female bodies in the contemporary societies of New Zealand, Australia and Canada. Foucault's theories on discipline and the shaping of bodies into useful productive forms provides a valuable way of understanding social processes marking and training the body. I have endeavoured to move away from the passivity of a body that is only drawn upon, and have also stopped short of the destabilisation of "woman" herself. Instead I have attempted to provide a space for transgression of the docile body of post-colonial patriarchal femininity.

From chapter one I moved to an exploration of a variety of fat bodies found in film and literature. Chapter two used the Jane Campion film *Sweetie* to explore a cinematic version of fatness: the monstrous feminine. The monster Sweetie is a larger than life screen figure who is a mad, revolting, aggressive woman acting out her familial dysfunction. But she is also a woman who inscribes herself through body paint, clothing and her loud speech. The monstrosity and madness of this figure is ambiguous and unsettling, but although Sweetie falls to her death in the film, her containment is not assured. The monstrous fat body remains a complex figure: Sweetie dies but her monstrosity lives on.

In chapter three I analysed bodies that become fat through the processes of aging and pregnancy, and two women's struggles with their own relationships to these fat figures. Mature-age, and pregnant bodies symbolise disintegration and lack of control, as no diet or discipline can halt the expansion of "the passage of time" or a pregnant woman. These two versions of the fat woman embody mortality, and their disintegration directly

contradicts discourses that maintain the primacy of the mind over the body. For the two main characters of Margaret Atwood's novels, *The Edible Woman* and *Lady Oracle*, the narratives of disintegration that surround aging and pregnancy reveal the limitations of the docile body that each character is struggling to adhere to.

Having explored the way in which the dominant discourses of docile female form are disrupted by the docile form itself through its growth beyond acceptable limits, chapter four then looked at the how the docile body is a racialised body. The central female character of Keri Hulme's *the bone people* is a character whose sexuality troubles many readers and critics. She presents her self as unsexed, as neither male or female, which has provided space for a reading of her as an androgynous figure. I argue that if Kerewin is politicised as a transvestite, then the safe encompassing space of androgyny is disrupted, and there has to be an engagement with the uncomfortable and outrageous body of Kerewin Holmes. It is only when looking at the way Kerewin constantly crosses and recrosses boundaries of gender that it is possible to see that the issue of race is fundamental to the inscription of the docile female body. The very body produced as evidence of Kerewin's androgyny is shown to be the product of culturally specific inscription, and while Kerewin may disrupt the confines of Pakeha docility she is asserting a Maori female identity.

Another aspect that is fundamental to the inscription of docility is class, and in chapter five I addressed the classed nature of the docile form, this time in an Australian setting. In this chapter I argued that Lilian Singer in *Lilian's Story* is positioned within a class discourse that sets her body against an image of middle-class normality. When she does not reflect the so-called normal body this provides the rhetorical justification for her subjugation and oppression. Because she is too fat, too loud and too passionate Lilian endures a range of social attempts to confine her, from school yard ridicule to verbal and sexual abuse. Lilian is associated with a range of bodies that are deviant, other bodies. She is dirty like the poor speechless Gwen, and the ambiguous, solitary Miss Gash. Lilian's body is intemperate, unclean and deviant, which in turn allows her to be treated as deserving of abuse and incarceration. Lilian's fatness becomes both the expression and

demonstration of her feeble-mindedness as she moves from the dominant-classes to the under-classes. But, as I have argued throughout this thesis, the fat figure is hard to contain and even as a loony old maid Lilian Signer continues to disrupt.

From a mad, fat woman who contains passivity and rebellion within the one form, I turned to look at a figure that attempts to wear the inscription of docility and the lady on a gigantic body in chapter six. The body of Anna Swan, the biggest modern woman of the world, is a giant example of how fatness is itself in neither simply empowering nor passive. Although Anna appears to be a transgressive giant body, that transgression is contained by discourses that reduce and confine the gigantism. Anna seeks to be the docile, decorous Canadian woman on a grand scale and succeeds in exaggerating her silence and passivity. The space open for this giant version of the fat body is in the impossibility of knowing or containing her, as she is layer after layer of surface.

In chapter seven I stepped back from a focus on variations of fat bodies and looked at the settler contexts within which bodies have become fat. *Lilian's Story*, *the bone people* and *The Biggest Modern Woman of the World* are all texts that have been read as being about nation. This chapter on the national body sought to look at the way in which cultural and historical contributions of national bodies affected the readings of these three fat women characters. The national bodies of Australia and New Zealand are overwhelmingly (white) male, and the reading of both Lilian Singer and Kerewin Holmes as national figures has very real political effects. The location of Lilian within the body of Australian legend both reveals the narrowness of the national body and simultaneously neutralises the disruption of the loony Lilian. *Lilian's Story* can never comfortably be accepted as a nationalist text because the hero is a fat woman, but it cannot be easily left outside of the canon of Australianist texts, because it is about the formation of nation and identity.

the bone people posed similar problems for a New Zealand nation whose national body is white and male. Moreover, the (international) image of New Zealand as an harmonious, bicultural society is called into question by the violence and ambiguity of the

novel. The issues of who is allowed to create, present or inscribe a national image on an internationally visible body is the locus of the conflict and tension over this text.

In the Canadian context the disruption of the national body by a female one is a key issue, since the allegorisation of the Canadian nation as female is a recurring motif within Canadian history. What is disruptive about this particular image of nation is not the sex of the body but the size of it. Although the gigantic proportions of Anna Swan mirror the gigantic landscape of Canada, her massive docility and inability to confirm herself as the subject at the centre of the text presents an image of a Canada that problematises historical and modernist notions of a nation state. Anna Swan is complicit in power relations that maintain Canada's subordinated position internationally, and continue colonisation while at the same time glossing over the colonial past and oppression within Canada. By evading the containment of either the traditional biography or the historical tradition of the great individual, this novel offers a vision of a fractured, diverse and uncontained national body and nation.

Although I have attempted to problematise the popular meanings of fatness, and to move beyond determinist cultural inscription and reveal the dynamism inherent in the fat female body, I am still left at the end of this thesis with a body that is marginalised and vilified. The image of fatness is still mobilised to justify discrimination, and is used as a symbolic gorgon from which "nice" women must turn away. The dominant discourses that result in most Australian, New Zealand and Canadian women being at the very least preoccupied with their body shapes, body fat, and food intake at the expense of self-esteem or even political activism, still prevail.

Despite this, most women will one day become fat, the impossibility of remaining within the parameters of the acceptable female figure being limited by definition. Just as Sweetie grew too big to contain the monstrosity at the heart of her family, and Joan was unable to sustain the image of her singularity, while Marian could not evade her links to the expansive, disintegrating mature-aged and pregnant women, so contemporary women move beyond an inscription that incorporates their docility within a reduced body.

Just as Kerewin got too angry and Lilian too mad, women physically express their rejection of aspects of the docile feminine. And, just as Anna Swan grew too big for finery and decorum, women can find spaces within the bounds of acceptable femininity which simultaneously transgress and replicate that gender identity. Fatness is ultimately a dynamic form that expresses power relations and shifts at the heart of contemporary, post-colonial societies. It is a body of protest and defeat, a body of transgression and capitulation. But it is also a body that is ultimately too big to be safely and finally contained within subordinating, disempowering discourses.

Perhaps fatness is the site where the soul meets the surface, where the lived experience of women as fat intersects with the discourses of illusory interiority. As an experience of the everyday, fat is the means by which dominant discourses of female containment and docility are challenged. Fat women are not always empowered through transgression, not always fundamentally challenging the structures of power, but they are a body of possibility. If interiority is all surface then maybe that surface needs to be fat.

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