New Body, New Me?
Fat Women Characters in North American Fiction, 1976-2013

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Abstract

"New Body, New Me? Fat Women Characters in North American Fiction, 1976-2013" unveils the cultural and literary significance of fictional journeys of fat women characters since the emergence of the fat-acceptance movement in the late 1960s. In doing so, it examines the role of fiction in imagining new possibilities and cultural imaginaries of gender and size. By examining novels that range from bestselling popular fictions, to niche fictions that are becoming popular with the fat-acceptance community, the thesis reassesses the familiar topics of consumption and weight loss in fat depictions through the lens of genre and narrative journeys. An analysis of Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle* (1976), Wally Lamb's *She's Come Undone* (1992), Susan Stinson's *Venus of Chalk* (2004) and Lionel Shriver's *Big Brother* (2013) reveals how fat women have been imagined in a variety of transformational weight loss and size acceptance journeys framed around maturity, recovery, community and family. The types of journeys in which women are imagined speak to collective assumptions about gender and size in the second half of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first and reveal how fat women's bodily and psychological journeys share several conventions including painful pasts, trials of gender and sexual visibility, difficult and convoluted paths to self-expression, and a divided sense of self. Moreover, these representative fictions of fatness reveal how fat representations are characterised by persistent and creative attempts to undermine myths of transformational change and total self-control. The significance of weight loss and size acceptance to representations of fatness in this period has hitherto been neglected, but by mapping the trend of narrative journeys, this project works to illuminate the

full extent to which transformation has been central to satirical, painful, or triumphant depictions of fat women's contested subject hood.

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Introduction

Fat Women Characters and Bodily Journeys in North American Fiction, 1976-2013

This thesis highlights the significance of journeys of bodily acceptance through weight loss or size-acceptance to the creation of fat women characters in North American fiction. In this study, I map how depictions of fat women in general and their bodily journeys in particular are represented and develop since the emergence of the fat-acceptance movement in the late 1960s. By examining representative depictions of fatness, this thesis sheds new light on the fraught and unfinished project of body acceptance that is foregrounded in fictions and investigates how writers engage with and critique ideas of self-control and transformational change. The primary texts are Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle* (1976), Wally Lamb's *She's Come Undone* (1992), Susan Stinson's *Venus of Chalk* (2004) and Lionel Shriver's *Big Brother* (2013). They have been selected from among other fictions alluded to here in comparison and counterpoint, because they trouble the supposedly transformational journeys made by fat women characters in revealing ways. My detailed analysis of fictions of fatness uncovers an identifiable set of narrative conventions and issue-based themes, including confrontations with hyper- or in-visibility, fantastical moments of bodily change, struggles with creative voice, and satirical performances of normative femininity and masculinity. In novels that range from bestselling and popular fictions by acclaimed writers, to more niche fictions popular with the fat-acceptance community, this thesis reveals how, over the course of five decades, fictions of fatness have emerged to coalesce as a subgenre that explores new narrative possibilities for fat women characters.

This study contributes to scholarship on contemporary North American fiction in two important ways. Firstly, it analyses how writers have engaged with existing social and cultural ideas around fatness as a problem in North America, from the 1970s to the 2010s. Secondly, it uncovers and examines the several competing literary narratives of body acceptance that have emerged around fatness. Bodily journeys not only question what it means to be fat but also explore feminist futures in the context of increasing public awareness of the fat acceptance movement and, since 1997, when the World Health Organisation declared a "global obesity epidemic" on the basis that the number of obese adults increased to over 300 million.[1] According to recent studies, 65% of the US population and 40% of the Canadian population are classified as overweight or obese, a statistic that is increasing.[2] In my analysis, fictions of fatness engage with this social problem but fat as a "problem" for women overshadows depictions of men. In selecting Shriver's *Big Brother* I engage with this discussion because in this novel women and men are given equal consideration through a symbiotic relationship between siblings. More generally, rather than fostering a singular vision of fat personhood, fictions of fatness have inspired two interlinking narratives of gender and weight: one, based on weight loss, is predicated on a fat character losing weight to recover from past traumas; the other is predicated on a fat character accepting a lack of total control over their body and learning to accept their size. The idea of self-transformation has inspired narratives that focus on notions of self-control and self-authorship, as well as collective assumptions about what it means to be fat in the late twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first.

[1] Obesity is defined as a Body Mass Index (BMI) above 30. To be classified as 'overweight' a person
[2] "National Obesity Trends". Centre for Disease Control (2010). "Overweight and obese adults (self-reported), 2014" Statistics Canada (2014).

The "journey" or quest is a story of character development through a series of physical and psychological trials. The history of journey narratives goes back to mythical and biblical studies, but in literary studies is examined predominantly in relation to the *Bildungsroman*, the form in which a character's development from childhood to maturity is typically traced. In my context, a character leaves the family home, experiences a period of separation that includes battling a conflict or problem, and eventual returns home, renewed and revitalised.[3] The journey is both literal (physical) and figurative (psychological) journey, an inner as well as an outer journey towards a moment of transformation, which typically refers to internal, spiritual or psychological change and growth as the basis for bodily change.[4] Home in fictions of fatness is interchangeable with food, and can be smothering as well as nourishing; it involves what Alexander Ganser in *Roads of Her Own* (2009) calls a "flight from domesticity" in order to re-negotiate expectations of and dependence on food.[5] Leaving home signifies a freedom to be different, even when leaving is only imagined as in *Big Brother*, or when changing parameters involves re-establishing oneself in a former home, as Carline does in Stinson's *Venus of Chalk*. Transformation in this context comes to realisation only when a character strikes out into the wider world and faces challenges for which they are unprepared.

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[3] The significance of this narrative pattern to fiction, and beyond it, to myth and hero narratives, was popularised by the work of American mythographer Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1949). Campbell argues that a study of the commonalities between myths, biblical stories and literary modes reveals a "monomyth" that has three distinctive components: "the standard path of the mythological adventure of the hero … represented in the rites and passage: separation – initiation – return", 28.

[4] For journeys in literature see: Lawrence Buell, *The Dream of the Great American Novel* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014); Susan Ashley Gohlman, *Starting Over: The Task of the Protagonist in the Contemporary Bildungsroman* (New York: Garland Publisher, 1990); Marilyn Wesley*, Secret Journeys: The Trope of Women's Travel in American Literature* (California: SUNY, 1999); Kenneth Millard, *Coming of Age in Contemporary American Fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007); Todorov Tzvetan, *The Morals of History* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1995); Janis Stout, *Through the Window, Out the Door: Women's Narratives of Departure* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1998).

[5] Alexander Ganser, *Roads of Her Own: Gendered Space and Mobility in American Women's Road Narratives, 1970-2000* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009), 14.

My research has confirmed an unusually rich stream of genre fiction is emerging out of fictional representations of fatness. This includes romance, adventure, science fiction, fantasy, historical fiction, and crime and detective fiction. In my contention, there is a subgenre of the *Bildungsroman* in the "recovery novel", road narrative, and a more recent proliferation of "illness narratives" where the self-transformative journey is also found. Writers of fiction do not uncomplicatedly ventriloquist fatness as it is presented in memoir, such as Kiese Laymon's *Heavy: An American Memoir* (2018), which conveys his struggles around the lived experience of fatness and its origins in childhood and parental control.[6] While memoirs share similarities with novels in a desire to explore "truthfulness" around difficult social and bodily realities of size, fiction presents joy, playfulness and ambiguity around fat embodiment through transformation, movement and travel that presents significant creative interventions in cultural and literary narratives of fatness.

Genre depictions of fatness are striking for how they rework narrative expectations and blend familiar formulas by affording space for fat characters in unexpected roles. This formal interest in deconstructing narrative rules reveals an interest in overturning stereotypes of fat men as grotesque exaggerations of rampant power and corruption and fat women as alienated from the social order by appearing to exist outside norms of gender and desirability.[7] For example, Sander L. Gilman identifies detectives as a rare positive fictional depiction of fat men, but journey narratives exhibit a more positive, diverse and ambitious rewriting of fatness, especially in the "triumphant" fat heroine.[8] While the fat detective's "criminal

[6] Kiese Laymon, *Heavy: An American Memoir* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018).
[7] Amy Farrell, *Fat Shame: Stigma and Fat Body In American Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2011). Elena Levy-Navarro, *Historicizing Fat in Anglo-American Culture* (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2010).
[8] Sander L. Gilman, "How Fat Detectives Think (And Fat Villains Act)" in *Fat Boys: A Slim Book* (Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), 153-192.

tendencies" (weak will, uncontrollable appetite) mainly help him relate to criminals and solve cases, in triumphant fat heroines authors challenge and deconstruct the fat figure as reclusive, eccentric, desexualized and pathologised – meanings that are reinforced in fat man detectives, even though they are reimagined as strengths.

This thesis investigates to what extent do bodily journeys in fictions of fatness engage, reflect and represent changing social, political and medical understandings of fatness? To what extent do writers of bodily journey narratives resist popular conceptions of obesity? How do they engage with gender and complicate images of fat womanhood in particular? What is gained in critical understanding by reading fictions of fatness through a fat studies activist framework? Studying the significance of bodily self-change introduces formal and stylistic questions such as, to what extent is self-change depicted as a realistic or fantastical development? How do realistic and fantastical depictions of fat bodies change as understandings of size change? How do depictions interact with or challenge existing conceptions of fat as excess?

Reading Fictional Representations of the Fat Female Body through the field of Fat Studies

Conceptualising the fat female body

To situate literary representations of fatness and obesity, my methodology draws on fat studies, an interdisciplinary field and a relatively recent school of thought that blends sociology and psychology, cultural and historical study, and media and popular culture studies. Critics who do examine fat characters tend to privilege a feminist psychoanalytic framework. Fat studies emerged as a critical field in the 2000s, to interrogate the myths and meanings of fat as they have developed historically. Marilyn Wann surveys the field to demonstrate how fat studies incorporates an agenda from activism that began in the 1960s to challenge dominant

popular narrative understandings of fatness which suggests fat people are sick, lazy, and "obviously ugly".[9] This body of scholarship has unpacked how fatness is associated with moral failings and framed as antithetical to citizenship and society for the suggestion that fat individuals lack of self-control and self-discipline.[10] Fat studies scholars historicise the politics of fatness, interrogating and recovering an activist politic while revealing the material realities and prejudice that many fat people face. One of the greatest advantages to fat studies as a field of inquiry for my study is that it provides a lens through which to examine fat as a culturally and politically constructed category.

Women in particular are a recurring focus of fears and anxieties about fatness. Fatness and obesity is a pressing problem for women and fat studies scholarships has indicated that 63% of teenage girls are designated as clinically "overweight" by the age of eleven.[11] Women mostly suffer more intensely from the repercussions of exclusion in public and private life, from sex and relationships to work, education and medicine. [12] Women's experience is at the core of marginal and popular understandings of fat as a political issue as evidenced by the emergence of fat feminist group the Fat Underground in the 1970s and polemical texts, notably Susie

[9] Marilyn Wann, "Foreword" in Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay (eds.) *The Fat Studies Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), ix.
[10] Farrell, *Fat Shame* (New York University Press, 2011). Levy-Navarro, *Historicizing Fat in Anglo-American Culture* (Ohio University Press, 2010). Peter Stearns, *Fat History: Bodies and Beauty in the Modern West* (New York: New York University Press, 1997). Sander L. Gilman, *Fat: A Cultural History of Obesity* (Cambridge: Polity, 2008). Katharina Vester, "Regime Change: Gender, Class, and the invention of diet in Post-bellum America" *Journal of Sociology and History* 44 (1) (2010), 39-70.
[11] "National Obesity Trends". Centre for Disease Control (2010). 20 per cent of all men and 25 per cent of all women in the USA are clinically 'obese' (not including adults that are clinically 'overweight'). Figures taken from "Obesity Trends among U.S. Adults Between 1985 and 2010", Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2010). The findings of this study are discussed in greater depth in Bonnie Spring, Arlen C. Moller, Michael J. Coons, "Multiple Health Behaviours: Overview and Implications", *Journal of Public Health* 34, (2012), 3-10.
[12] D. Roe and K. Eichwort, "Relationship between obesity and associated health factors with unemployment among low income women" *Journal of the American Women's Medical Association* 31 (1976), 193-204.

Orbach's *Fat is a Feminist Issue* (1978).[13] Activists linked the feminist idea that women's social value is intimately tied to self-discipline and the body's appearance with the contention that instead of being maligned size acceptance is a form of control and resistance. This later captured the imagination of Julia Kristeva in the psychoanalytic concept of abjection (1980) and Mary Russo and her development of Mikhail Bakhtin's carnivalesque in the female grotesque (1994).[14] They theorise how supposedly unruly women's bodies embody fears but also fantasies, about transgressive sexuality, deviant behaviour and bodily autonomy. Such studies form a bedrock for cultural and literary interpretations of fatness, but they have also tended to reinforce stereotypical conceptions of fat womanhood that they intend to critique – fatness as static, extreme, unusual, hypersexual, and even pathological. Focused, localized, personalized writing on fatness opens new ways of interpreting the representation of fat women's bodies that do not hinge on generalised conceptions of femininity to fatness as anterior. In my analysis fat studies is crucial for moving away from intellectual traditions rooted in late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century conceptions of normalcy and difference, such as psychoanalytic thought and the grotesque and this thesis illustrates how writers of fiction have engaged with this shift as a journey.

A fat studies methodology is crucial for conceiving of the fat woman's body as a site of social meanings that extend beyond negative power. The fat woman's body holds imaginative and literary possibilities that interact with tradition, the cultural order and notions of reform. Fat studies scholar Jennifer Mobley has

[13] Zora Simic, "Fat as a Feminist Issue: A History" in Helen Hester and Caroline Walters (eds.) *Fat Sex: New Directions in Theory and Activism* (Ashgate, 2015). Susie Orbach, *Fat is a Feminist Issue* (New York and London: Paddington Press, 1994 [1978]).
[14] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980). Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World,* trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984 [1965]). Mary Russo, *The Female Grotesque* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

discussed, for example, how an overwhelming focus on fat white women in the diet and weight loss industries reinforces their bodies as changeable and flexible in comparison to other social groups, as if white women are capable of reforming their behaviours and appetites.[15] The fat white woman's ambiguous relationship to convention and culture has been analysed in fiction on the U.S. South in Sharon Monteith's *Advancing Sisterhood? Interracial Friendships in Contemporary Southern Fiction* (2000) and Patricia Yaeger's *Dirt and Desire: Reconstructing Southern Women's Writing, 1930-1990* (2000).[16] Sharon Monteith and Patricia Yaeger have separately established fat white women's bodies as inversions of idealised white femininity and fragility, assorting them from stereotypes, and focusing instead on bodies that become monuments to histories and cultural tensions. Self-change narratives of fatness subvert static meanings whereby fat characters either represent triumphant stories of bodily reform or monstrous depictions of tradition. Instead, changing fat characters travel, sometimes hopefully and sometimes hazardously, across social experiences of deviation and conformity, exclusion and acceptance. In my readings, self-change journey narratives are defined by their mobility and nomadism that reflect new experiences, confrontations with difference, and social adaptation.

Approaching fat as a feminist issue

This thesis self-consciously adopts a fat feminism over a feminist approach because, while these two political intellectual traditions and movements overlap, they also contain key distinctions. Fat studies critics have established that the concerns and

[15] Jennifer Mobley, *Female Bodies on the American Stage: Enter Fat Actress* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 26.
[16] Sharon Monteith, *Advancing Sisterhood? Interracial Friendships in Contemporary Southern Fiction* (London: University of Georgia Press, 2000); Patricia Yaeger, *Dirt and Desire: Reconstructing Southern Women's Writing, 1930-1990* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2000).

lived realities of size-specific discrimination have largely been isolated from the agendas and successes of mainstream feminism.[17] While women's rights expanded in the 1960s and 1970s, in the U.S. fat remained an unprotected category of discrimination until 2013 when Congress passed the ADA Amendments Act, which expanded the definition of what constitutes a disability.[18] This development means that now there is greater chance of weight discrimination being taken seriously but it also relies on a definition of fat as an illness and the discrimination fat women still experience in the workplace, and in education as well as in the doctor's office is under-discussed, and legal action only available through a complicity with pathologisation. Issues for fat feminist groups in relation to gender would only emerge more prominently in mainstream feminist agendas later. Fat feminist groups were already implementing a form of intersectional feminist practice in publications such as *Shadow on a Tightrope* (1983) that featured perspectives on gender, size, race, class, disability, and age. Likewise, fat feminist activism discussed the thin body as a locus of power and privilege but these ideas are incorporated and popularised in feminist writing in the 1990s in titles such as Noami Wolf's *The Beauty Myth: How Imagines of Beauty are Used Against Women* (1990).[19] The waves of feminism were materially and intellectually out of sync with developments in fat feminist activism.

If distinctions are not understood between fat activism and feminist thought and practice the concern is that fat women characters are considered as metaphorical exaggerations of thin women, rather than having a distinct social and political experience that is reflected in fiction. The intellectual trend of seeing fat women as

[17] Zora Simic, "Fat as a Feminist Issue: A History" in Helen Hester and Caroline Walters (eds.) *Fat Sex: New Directions in Theory and Activism* (London and New York: Ashgate, 2015). Charlotte Cooper, *Fat Activism: A Radical Social Movement* (Bristol: HammerOn Press, 2016).
[18] Jennifer Pomeranz and R.M Puhl, "New developments in the law for obesity discrimination protection" *Obesity* 21.3 (2013), 469-471.
[19] Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth: How Imagines of Beauty are Used Against Women* (New York: Random House, 1990).

distorted mirrors of thin women began with the feminist psychoanalytical work of Orbach who suggests fat women characters present a dramatic extreme of the psychoanalytical relationship between mothers, daughters and nurturing that exists for all women.[20] In the 1990s Kim Chernin and Noami Wolf criticised a culture of compulsory slenderness in women, positioning fatness as a reaction to the pressure to be thin that exists for all women.[21] The understanding of fatness as an inversion of thinness is reflected in how the notion of "starving" figures in critical discussions of fatness, such as Maud Ellmann's *The Hunger Artists: Starving, Writing and Imprisonment* (1993) and Patrick Anderson's *'So Much Wasted': Hunger, Performance, and the Morbidity of Resistance* (2010).[22] Ellmann identifies hunger as protest, and Anderson highlights how women perform a disappearing act through (not)-eating, which reflect a spectacularisation of the under-consuming body that has transferred to critical studies of fatness. These studies focus on self-consciously political, historical and literary displays of starvation, such as hunger strikes, associated with different groups from the suffragettes to Northern Irish political protestors, and the performance of self-starvation in Samuel Richardson's *Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded* (1740) or Franz Kafka's "A Hunger Artist" (1922), which is radically different to the everyday, private, personal act of 'overeating', as fatness has been traditionally understood. Conceiving of the fat body as a radically powerful symbol of resistance and negative performance is an act of theorisation, and sometimes sensationalism, that erases the everyday, mundane, lived realities of fat

[20] Orbach, *Fat is a Feminist Issue* (Paddington Press, 1994 [1978]).
[21] Kim Chernin *The Obsession: Reflections on the Tyranny of Slenderness* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1981). Wolf, *The Beauty Myth* (Random House, 1990).
[22] Maud Ellmann, *The Hunger Artists: Starving, Writing, and Imprisonment* (Harvard: University of Harvard, 1993). Patrick Anderson, *'So Much Wasted': Hunger, Performance, and the Morbidity of Resistance* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

people or, framed in my terms, replicates in critical writing the minimisation of social realities around size in feminist activism.

A feminist psychoanalytical tradition has dominated interpretations of fatness but psychoanalytical thought has played a central role in the pathologisation and medicalisation of size. A fat studies approach seeks to circumvent this by recognising how psychoanalytic approaches to fictions of fatness typically see them as reproducing the logics of medical discourse, instead of dynamically intervening and interrogating these logics. In a chapter in the edited collection *Bodies Out Of Bounds* (2001), Sarah Shieff argues that a productive feminist message is in the resolution of fat woman's story-arcs, which usually end with a central character breaking away from her mother and resolving or sublimating her oral fixation into healthier habits, such as talking.[23] However, Freudian conceptualisations are markedly self-conscious and ambiguous. For example, at the end of *Lady Oracle*, Joan confronts her mother and engages in "the speaking cure" but it is left ambiguous as to whether she will break out of her habits. *She's Come Undone* features a "maverick" therapist who attempts to correct Dolores's foetal and psychosexual development in a swimming pool but the results of this radical intervention are unclear. *Big Brother* features a psychosexual fantasy where brother and sister regress and re-programme Edison's oral fixation, which is then revealed to have never happened in any case. Even in the self-consciously fat-positive novel *Venus of Chalk*, a psychosexual drama is evident in less overtly psychological patterns, as when Carline travels back to her aunt (a mother-substitute) to confront the source of her self-harming (oral fixation) and overcome feelings of separation and nurturing anxiety. A latent psychoanalytic

[23] Sarah Shieff, "Devouring Women: Corporeality and Autonomy in Recent Fiction by Women" in *Bodies out of Bounds: Fatness and Transgression* Kathleen LeBesco and Jana Evans Braziel (eds) (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

fantasy is in direct conflict with the manifest content and political messaging of the story, frustrating and disrupting fantasy for Carline and for readers. In fictions of fatness, then, psychoanalysis is typically a meta-narrative that writer's play with, disrupt, and regularly undermine.

Reading psychoanalytical themes as a self-conscious critical element is integral to understanding how fictions of fatness challenge psychological health and recovery, common to both psychoanalytic thought and traditional journey narratives. In archetypal journey narratives, Campbell argues that the hero's quest often involves a physical deed, such as "a courageous act in battle or sav[ing] a life".[24] In fictions of fatness, the physical transformational moment is often presented as an overt or thinly veiled metaphorical defeat of the mother, the source of the oral fixation and social delay, and the life saved is her or his own. However, these transformations are distinctly comical, unusual and fantastical. Joan's weight loss in *Lady Oracle* is depicted in terms of a hallucinatory period brought on by blood poisoning and sustained through diet pills. Dolores in *She's Come Undone* loses weight when she is "re-parented" by her therapist in a swimming pool. Stinson's road narrative, a bus journey mimics a return to childhood for Carline. Shriver's Edison loses weight during a period of "uneating" with sister Pandora, which involves giving up solid food completely. These "rebirths" do not follow up with the psychological and social transformation they promise, and are instead detached from harder, internal work that is often unfinished or left unclear at each novel's end. In my reading, fictions of fatness parody popular and psychoanalytic discourses that suggest the body is a site where psychological recovery and social integration can be completed.

[24] Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Pantheon Books, 1949), 102.

Analysing bodily change from a fat studies perspective also provides a new way of conceiving of and questioning the fat body through Mikhail Bakhtin's theories of the "grotesque". The changing fat body reflects a fantasy where the grotesque body, defined by orifices and bodily functions, is reformed into the ordered "classical" body, which is "closed, smooth and impenetrable".[25] When Mary Russo popularised a gendered interpretation of the grotesque in *The Female Grotesque* (1994), she argued that the subversive potential in "stunted" and grotesque female bodies, like fat women, has been underappreciated generally, and instead "stunting" women, epitomised by aerialist Amelia Earhart, are celebrated for their "masculinised" physical displays and performances.[26] Zeynep Atayurt's *Excess and Embodiment in Contemporary Women's Writing* (2011) evokes Russo to formulate a "new aesthetics of embodiment" that is really a reversal of values by celebrating, rather than condemning, depictions of excess.[27] It is indicative of an overlooked element that fictions of fatness can challenge grotesque performances through a central character's erratic, nomadic, and trickster behaviours. For example, both Joan in Atwood's *Lady Oracle* and Dolores in Lamb's *She's Come Undone* lose weight, leave the childhood home, and spontaneously fly to another country, where they fabricate entirely new identities in romantic relationships. In these novels, Russo's conception of the "stunting" grotesque is reimagined in more domestic and everyday terms as the total physical, mental and biographical female grotesque performance of conventional, conformist femininity – one that is eventually revealed to be an appalling deception. Fictions of fatness subvert the concept of "reformed" grotesque

[25] Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Indiana University Press, 1984 [1965]), 317-318.
[26] Russo, *The Female Grotesque* (Routledge, 1994), 22-23.
[27] Zeynep Atayurt, *Excess and Embodiment in Contemporary Women's Writing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 169.

figures by presenting grotesque presentation as shifting, adaptive, active and devious and sometimes entirely divorced from fatness.

An overlooked issue in feminist approaches is that fat women can experience gender differently from women who are not fat which may affect opportunities to radically break away from conventional expectations of what it is to be feminine. When Susan Bordo reads the seminal third-wave feminist text *Gender Trouble* (1990) by Judith Butler, where gender is performative acts and "pure text", she argues that Butler's theory of performativity is based on an implicit normative and accepted subject, whose political disruption is possible and powerful because they are already "legible" as gendered.[28] In my analysis, fat women have been historically placed outside of cultural scripts and alienated from gender performance. The fictions of fatness I have selected depict a fat character's experience, even enjoy, an antithetical and ambiguous relationship to gender normativity and feminist ideas as well as patriarchal power.

While analyses of fat women's bodies typically focus on women-authored cultural productions, I am keen to not close off noteworthy texts based on the author's gender alone. This is influenced by the fact that fat activism originated as a mixed-gender political project that did not close down the possibilities of recognition and understanding of the size based on gender but recognises synthesis. If I had excluded Lamb based on a lack of personal real-world experience, I would attribute a false sense of experience and authority to other writers and reproduce an idea that all women understand all women's experiences, which is clearly not the case. It would simplify the dissonance with feminism that has also defined many fat women's

[28] Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 38. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

experiences and is a central tension in fictions of fatness. Instead, I consider Wally Lamb as well as writers like Atwood and Shriver, who do not have personal experience of substantial weight gain and loss themselves, precisely because I am approaching fat women's depictions and transformational journeys as imagined and created, rather than lived and experienced as would be the case had I focused on memoirs. By extending the parameters of my study, this gesture highlights that "lived experience" is only one criteria when it comes to representations of fat subjecthood in fiction.

Another productive issue this thesis engages is the idea that fat women characters will appear alone or lonely because fictions of fatness, in the 2010s especially, open up to focus on two or more protagonists struggle. This is the case in Shriver's *Big Brother*, where narrator Pandora and her brother Edison are both clinically overweight and pursue radical weight loss together in an imaginary counterfactual sequence. Shriver explores Pandora's grief over her brother's death from "obesity-related" illnesses and her discontent with her husband's controlling behaviour, as well as her own relationship with food and eating. In this novel, and in others of this period like Liz Moore's *Heft* (2012) and Michael Kimbell's *Big Ray* (2012), fat men are projections through which a separate but intimately related narrator interrogates their relationships with their bodies, weight and self-control.[29] To exclude such a text, or any discussion of this trend in twenty-first century fictions of fatness, would introduce a formal determinism that is based too rigidly on certain ideas of what a fat woman's journey narrative looks like (a single narrator with an identifiable quest or self-development narrative, and women characters whose stories are obviously and primarily focused on their struggles with size). By including novels

[29] Liz Moore *Heft* (New York: Windmill Random House, 2012); Michael Kimball, *Big Ray* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2012).

that feature multiple characters with different representations of self-change, my study reveals how bodily journeys have remained at the core of imaginaries of fatness but have also grown more stylistically and conceptually complex as anxieties over obesity have proliferated.

Reading fatness in context, 1960s to 2010s

From 1976 to 2013, fatness undergoes significant changes as part of longer efforts to understand, explain and resolve this rapidly prominent social reality. While Chapter One establishes the intellectual and contextual history for fictions of fatness to support my analyses in my close textual analyses, a brief overview of the conflicting and simultaneous developments is summarised as follows. In the 1960s, the first fat-acceptance activist collective was founded, the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance (NAAFA), which identified fatness as a source of discrimination, prejudice and oppression.[30] In the 1970s and 1980s, Orbach's bestseller *Fat is A Feminist Issue* (1978) and Kim Chernin's *The Obsession: Reflections on The Tyranny of Slenderness* (1981) popularised cultural understandings of fatness as a gendered issue.[31] In the 1990s, psychologist Vincent J. Felitti initiated a shift from Freudian psychosexual explanations of fatness to a trauma model, linking fatness to childhood sexual abuse.[32] In the same period, size acceptance broke into mainstream culture with anti-dieting messages reflected in Health at Every Size (HAES).[33] From the 2000s, a global obesity crisis revealed the U.S. to have the highest obesity levels of

[30] For the history of the Fat-Acceptance and the role of NAAFA see, Dan Fletcher, "The Fat-Acceptance Movement" *Time* (31 July 2009).
[31] Orbach, *Fat is a Feminist Issue* (Paddington Press, 1994 [1978]); Chernin *The Obsession: Reflections on the Tyranny of Slenderness* (Harper Perennial, 1981).
[32] Vincent J. Felitti. "Childhood sexual abuse, depression, and family dysfunction in adult obese patients: a case control study" *Southern Medical Journal* 86.7 (1993).
[33] For a history of non-dieting approaches to care for obese women see, Ellison, McPhail and Mitchinson (eds) *Obesity in Canada: A Critical Perspective* (University of Toronto Press, 2016), 61. For more on the history of HAES, including their mission statement and organisational past: https://haescommunity.com/.

any developed world nation and led Surgeon General Richard Carmona and former U.S. Surgeon General C. Everett Koop to declare a "war on obesity" and equate the "obesity epidemic" to a threat as real as terrorism.[34] One of the greatest advantages to fat studies as a field of inquiry for my study is that it provides a lens through which to examine the novel as a form where these meanings and shifts are explored and worked through.

Any cultural history of fatness is also implicitly a print history, of which fiction has been a vibrant but under-discussed strand. An oversight in cultural histories like Elena Levy-Navarro's *Historicizing Fat in Anglo-American Culture* (2010) and Amy Erdman Farrell's *Fat Shame: Stigma and the Fat Body in American Culture* (2011) as well as Charlotte Cooper's "A Queer and Trans Fat Activist Timeline" is the novel. Fiction is absent when novels have provided fertile ground for the circulation of fat acceptance ideas and imaginaries of fatness that have otherwise found heavily contested and delayed paths to publication in other forms.[35] For example, an influential intertextual connection for fictions of fatness is the Fat Underground's *Shadow on a Tightrope* (1983), an anthology of life writing, poetry and essays that features wrenching stories of weight loss and size acceptance. It was compiled in the 1970s but only found publication in the 1980s.[36] Until the 1980s, dieting books and psychological studies of fatness proliferated, while fat acceptance groups found active resistance to publication that kept radical ideas of fat acceptance

[34] "Surgeon general to cops: Put down the donuts", *CNN* (March 2003). http://edition.cnn.com/2003/HEALTH/02/28/obesity.police/ (accessed 12 January 2017). Robert A. Rosenblatt, "Surgeon General Takes Stern Stance on Obesity" *Los Angeles Times* (14 December 2001), A.41. "Obesity Bigger Threat than Terrorism?" *Associated Press* (1 March 2004), 2.

[35] Farrell, *Fat Shame* (New York University Press, 2011); Levy-Navarro, *Historicizing Fat* (Ohio University Press, 2010); Charlotte Cooper, *A Queer and Trans Fat Activist Timeline*. April 2011. <http://www.charlottecooper.net/downloads/timelinezine/cooper_queertransfatactivisttimeline_zine_0411.pdf>.

[36] The publication history of their book is discussed in the introduction of Lisa Schoenfielder, and Barb Wieser (ed) *Shadow On A Tightrope: Writings By Women on Fat Oppression* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 1983), 1-12.

out of wide public circulation and, I would argue, out of sync with mainstream feminist discussions. In contrast, novels of fat women's subjectivity appear with increasing frequency in North America since 1965 when Australian writer Christina Stead's novel *The Man Who Loved Children* was published to critical acclaim in the U.S. (after having been first published in 1940).[37] If fictions of fatness proliferate now, they are revealing a steady expansion of more diverse depictions of fat women, from sad stories of internal conflict, domestic suffocation and grotesque characterisation in the 1970s and 1980s, to heroic stories of survival, travel, and romantic and professional success in the 1990s and 2000s, to a shift towards less celebratory but more nuanced literary re-conceptions of fat characters as a flawed "everyman" or "everywoman" in the 2010s. The novel is the form where the fat woman is first taken seriously as a figure of complexity and contemplation, and where critiques of size prejudice and social realities are explored. While fat activism found routes into larger audiences later, this intellectual legacy of social reflection and critique persisted for much longer in fictions of fatness and contributes to its literary development as a potent, self-reflective subgenre of contemporary fiction.

The relationship between creative production and social discourse is not uni-directional in fictions of fatness (from social discourse to aesthetic representation) but bound to one another. It has fed into political culture, then insights into social discussions and personal experience. For example, the title for *Shadow on A Tightrope* bears a striking similarity to the original cover of Atwood's *Lady Oracle*, which features a thin woman on a tightrope submerged in the overbearing silhouette of a fat lady. This suggests an intertextual influence between fictional and political

[37] Christina Stead, *The Man Who Loved Children* (New York and London: Rinehart & Winston, 1965 [1940]); Shieff also provides a history of women's fat depiction in "Devouring Women: Corporeality and Autonomy in Recent Fiction by Women" in *Bodies out of Bounds: Fatness and Transgression* (University of California Press, 2001).

depictions of fatness, particularly around the fat tightrope walker that encapsulates the fat body as out of place but performing formerly unimaginable physical feats.

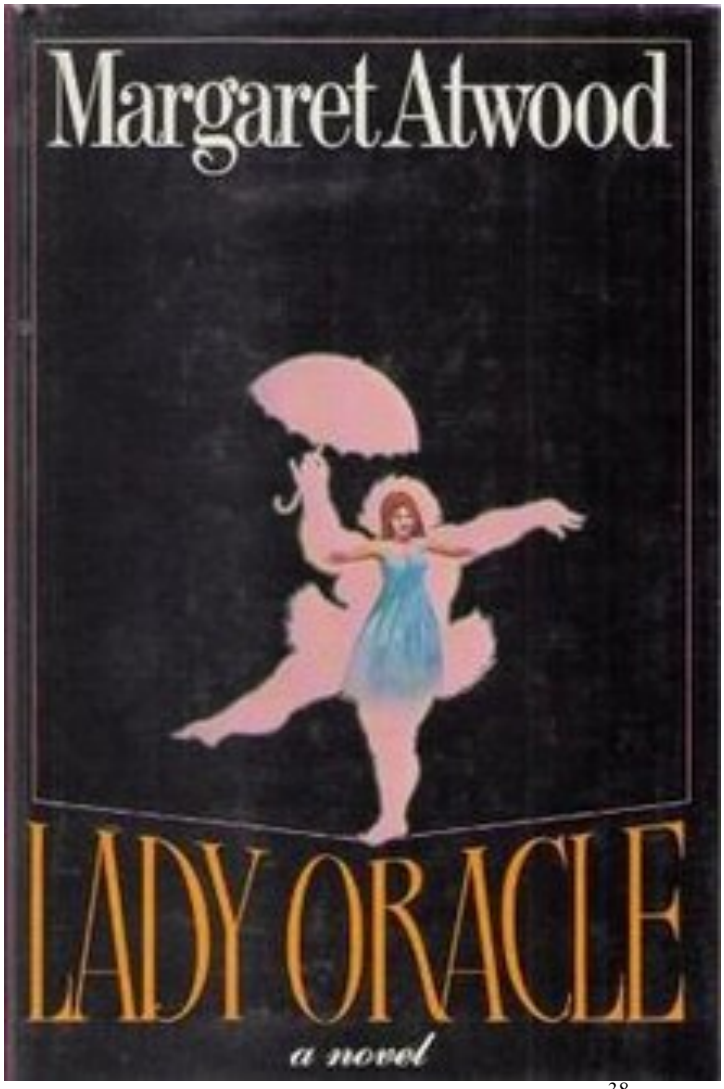


Fig 1.0: *Lady Oracle* first edition cover.[38]

That literary texts may be synergistic with fat studies as it has developed as a field has yet to be explored and this thesis begins that work by paying attention to how aesthetic depictions of fatness are mediated, reconceived or rediscovered by popular, print, and mainstream media imagination as social discourse and experience. The consideration of novel as a source of social commentary is evident in the way my selected novelists have found their texts defined by an uncertainty in classification and genre, particularly related to realism and biography. Lamb's *She's Come Undone*

[38] Margaret Atwood, *Lady Oracle* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1976).

was published in 1992 but became a bestseller in 1997, specifically through its promotion on Oprah's book club, connecting this novel to a tradition of painful lives and memoir that Oprah popularised.[39] Shriver's *Big Brother* was published alongside articles about her personal experience of her brother's obesity crisis and death.[40] Stinson's first text *Fat Girl Dances With Rocks* (1994) was published as a novel for adults but which Stinson herself more readily celebrates through its "second life as a YA book", due to socio-political changes in attitudes toward age and queer and fat representation in fiction for young people: "the world has changed since it was published in terms of how much of a barrier queer content might be in those worlds".[41] While it could be disparagingly said that this expectation suggests fictions of fatness are valued for their social commentary rather aesthetics, or are carefully packaged to manage their radical ideas in Stinson's case, this also reflects the perception, dating back to the 1960s and 1970s, that the novel is where social commentary of fatness may be discovered.

If from the 1970s, writers have harboured a fascination with waves of social acceptance in relation to the demonisation of size the focus on fat characters' familial roles as daughter, mother or, as Caroline Narby and Katherine Phelps have argued, as hybrid "woman-houses" has missed how distinctive character-types in representations of fatness also draw on broader political, medical and popular discourses.[42] These characters dramatise fantasies and anxieties around social and spatial freedoms,

[39] Eva Illouz, *Oprah Winfrey and the Glamour of Misery: An Essay on Popular Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).
[40] Lionel Shriver, "I Can't Accept 'Fat Pride'" *Standpoint* (2009) http://standpointmag.co.uk/node/2426/full (accessed 5 May 2016). Reviews of the book ranging from Juiny Willet's "Too Large to Fail: Lionel Shriver's Big Brother" *New York Times* (June 2013) and Viv Groskop "Lionel Shriver: Time to talk about her Big Brother" *The Observer* (21 April, 2013) also frame the book as a response to her brother's passing.
[41] Quotation from Susan Stinson in a comment on "'YA Fatphobia' by Kathryn Nolfi, DiceyTillerman livejounral (2011). Accessed 12/11/2018. https://diceytillerman.livejournal.com/34041.html
[42] Caroline Narby and Katherine Phelps, "As Big as a House: Representations of the Extremely Fat Woman and the Home" *Fat Studies* 2.2 (2013).

bodily violence, and fragility. The housewife, depicted in Atwood's *Lady Oracle*, reflects a conflicted figure evoked by fat acceptance activists to articulate alienation from mainstream feminism and queer politics in the 1970s. The abuse "victim", the focus of Lamb's *She's Come Undone*, is a survivor in the psychological and popular imagination of fatness in the 1990s. The traveller, the central character in Stinson's *Venus of Chalk*, is an adventuring protagonist who reflects the increasing visibility and social mobility of fat people in the 2000s. The dying fat figure in Shriver's *Big Brother* is a doomed character who also represents the demonisation of fat people as fatally sick and a threat to society in the 2010s, but who is explored beyond this depiction in this novel. With changing cultural understandings of fatness, inventive writers reimagine the social and bodily realities of fat women characters in relation to representative characters evoked in cultural and political discourse to explore, challenge and parody evolving public discourses around size.

While it has deepened my analysis to situate texts in context, my aim is not to present a decade-based argument or to claim this is a comprehensive analysis of fictional representations of fatness since the 1970s. I am not interested in creating a tentative typology of, or division around, each decade, implying that each decade is distinct or drastically different. Instead, my analysis teases out connections, commonalities, and deviations between texts that focus on weight loss and body self-acceptance. Representations of bodily change are not even or equally present in each decade of the late twentieth-century. Texts in the 1980s, such as Audre Lorde's *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982), Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus* (1984) or Jeannette Winterson's *Sexing the Cherry* (1989), reflect a temporary movement away from the themes of transformation or bodily change, which is interesting in itself but

beyond the scope of this thesis to analyse in-depth.[43] To speculate on a possible explanation, the 1980s was a transitional moment where fat acceptance ideas were gaining a larger audience in North America and abroad, and the socio-medical panic around fatness in the 1990s had yet to establish itself. 1980s fictions reflect a certain optimism and the prevalence of the fat woman's body as an inventive surface is home to other fantastical possibilities, like wings, in Carter's *Nights at the Circus*, or gigantic bodies and limbs, in Winterson's *Sexing the Cherry*. In contrast, the journey narrative is a story-type in periods of intense anxiety and social re-negotiations of fatness. It is precisely this anxiety that I am interested in excavating and establishing as a thematic and stylistic concern in narratives where a bodily journey is fragmented.

One of the pitfalls of historicist approaches is that they can lose specificity and complexity when mapping trends across groups of texts. Extended analysis is crucial for evading a reading over-determined by historical context while identifying a dynamic literary engagement with history, culture and politics. It is also crucial for avoiding a progressive narrative of development that historically-informed approaches can create. Instead, a key finding of my study is how fictions of fatness do not show a progressive narrative of development. This study reveals a distinctly non-linear and cyclical development around size acceptance. For example, in Chapters Two and Four I discuss fat women as socially invisible and alienated from gender normativity, and in Chapters Three and Five, fat figures as victims of, and perpetuators of, violence and trauma. This reflects an unresolved engagement with these concerns and, for writers and readers, a need to assess journey narratives for the ways in which they try to reach a satisfactory or fulfilling conclusion.

[43] Audre Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (London: Crossing Press, 2001 [1982]); Angela Carter, *Nights at the Circus* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1984); Jeanette Winterson, *Sexing the Cherry* (London: Vintage, 1990 [1989]).

Size Acceptance Journeys in Fiction: A Different Story

Journeys in fictions of fatness interrogate the 'transformed' unhappy, fat character and infuse this motif with other symbolic transformations and revelations, including maturing to adulthood, recovering from traumatic events, renegotiating one's sense of home and place, and reconciling one's feelings of guilt and responsibility following the death of a loved one. I privilege the notion of change in concepts of fatness and not only as reflected in the prevalence of triumphant narratives of weight loss and size acceptance in popular and political discourse. Fat studies scholar Samantha Murray posits that fat subjects are perceived to undertake an improbable process of change and 'becoming' that has been problematically replicated in fat-acceptance discourse.[44] A person's relationship with size is culturally and politically conceived as in the process of being resolved – either through the erasure of the fat body (becoming thin through weight loss) or in the erasure of one's unhappiness with one's body (becoming content through size acceptance). In this formulation, fatness reflects "magical thinking" in the perceived physical flexibility of the body or the fat acceptance notion that by accepting one's body, other people's responses to fat bodies are also transformed. So central is self-change to constructions of fat subjecthood as to be inseparable from developmental milestones, such as maturing to adulthood, recovering from psychological fixations or traumatic events, or developing healthy relationships. The novelists I have selected interrogate the magical thinking behind narratives of self-change and destablise the understanding of self-change as synonymous with self-development.

Therefore, this study draws on queer theory and trauma theory to examine the disruption of journeys of self-development in the ways writers play with textual

[44] Samantha Murray, *The "Fat" Female Body* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

dualities of movement and stasis, invisibility and visibility, normativity and non-normativity, and progression and cyclicality. Queer theory, with its non-heteronormative logics and subjectivities, and trauma theory with its focus on the consequences of psychological damage, may make sense of fat characters as "othered", gendered, and sick figures whose stories are defined by repetition, irony and refusal. These theories contribute to understanding the strange temporalities that define fat women characters, as well as uncertain progressions and in putative resolutions of texts. Queer theorists J. Halberstam and Kathryn Bond Stockton argue non-normative and queer subjectivities are defined by "negative" logics of being and thinking, such as stasis, failure and non-productivity.[45] Terry Castle precedes this work in her study *The Apparitional Lesbian* (1993) by establishing lesbian figures in literary history as defined by absence and rendered ghostly.[46] From a psychoanalytic tradition, trauma theorist Cathy Caruth proposes trauma is defined by repetition, cyclicality and "unrepresentability".[47] Rob Nixon's "slow" violence has also expanded conceptions of traumatic moments in terms of scale (ecological events) and time (gradual and progressive) by examining "slow emergences" in debt to Caruth's "relived" traumatic moment.[48] Through this mix of theoretical approaches, "negative" elements (such as, repetition, stasis, hyper-activity, invisibility) can be read productively as refusals to fulfil heteronormative logics as well as psychoanalytic – and pathologising – models of fatness that self-development narratives hinge on and explore in intriguing ways.

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[45] Kathryn Bond Stockton, *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009); Jack Halberstam, *In A Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005).
[46] Terry Castle, *The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture* (New York: Columbia University, 1993).
[47] Cathy Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (London: Johns Hopkins University, 1995).
[48] Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence, Gender and the Environmentalism of the Poor. (*Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011).

To balance the diverse literary, historical and theoretical strands that are pulled together throughout the thesis, I have anchored my study in representative texts for shifts in fat characterisation through journey narratives rather than adopt a broad survey approach. Literary criticism of fat fictional representation has taken place in shorter critical forms, chapters or articles by, for example, Monteith and Yaeger or in overviews, such as those by Shieff, Kelly, and Dykewomon.[49] To pursue new critical conceptions of fatness, it is crucial to adopt ways of writing about fatness that prioritise extended analysis, depth and close reading. Close reading is crucial for reconsidering patterns and symbols whose meanings have otherwise been predetermined by a theoretical framework and, as an extension, essential for investing in the creative and imaginative authority of writers. With this approach, new themes, symbols and complexities can be discovered that have been missed in broader studies. Dykewomon cites Jami Attenberg's family saga *The Middlesteins* (2011) as an example of fiction which features a fat mother's insatiable eating at the heart of a family crisis. In a scathing indictment, Dykewomon reflects: "So perhaps readers are still willing to swallow physical embodiments meant to stand in for a culture of consumption, as long as they are 'sensitively' drawn".[50] However, an extended analysis of Shriver's *Big Brother* reveals a much more nuanced depiction of hyperbolic stereotypes that critiques the social panic around fatness in the "global obesity epidemic" era, as opposed to a period's anxieties.

Sustained close analysis establishes the significance of a cluster of authors to fictions of fatness. The prevalence of select approaches, like psychoanalysis and the grotesque, has entrenched the importance of Carter, Winterson and one of the authors

[49] Elana Dykewomon, "In Search of the Fabled Fat Woman" *Fat Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Body Weight and Society* 3.1 (2014).
[50] Ibid., 2.

I study, Atwood, for depictions of gender and size. However, the other writers considered in this thesis, Wally Lamb and Susan Stinson, and to a lesser extent Lionel Shriver, have received less critical attention when they exemplify exciting, ambiguous, and even playful, characterisations. Inherent in my methodology is the will to consider writers who have not been considered in the context of fictions of fatness and treat their works seriously, by delving deeply into the imaginaries they have crafted. Paying extended attention also establishes the significance of their writing within and beyond fictions of fatness and counters the emphasis on memoir and young adult fiction in recent scholarship on twenty-first century depictions of fatness. For example, the only new twenty-first century writer Atayurt includes in her study is a memoirist. This approach suggests there may be a counter-canon appearing alongside non-fiction narratives of fatness that explores fat bodied narrators not only as sages – figures that guides against bullying or promote size acceptance ideas – but as playful and deceptive figures who are defined by their fantasies as well as their realities.

Key texts in journeys of bodily transformation

In order to establish the intellectual and contextual history for fictions of fatness, Chapter One offers an expansive overview of fat as cultural, medical and political concept from the 1960s to the 2010s to establish how fatness has been undervalued as a negative signifier of lack of control and weak will, which continues to resonate in contemporary fiction and is addressed there. It connects fictions of fatness to a fat activist history, and establishes the centrality of bodily change, either through weight loss or size acceptance, as central to activist discourse represented in *Shadow on a Tightrope* (1983). It troubles and extends existing fat studies criticism about different 'waves' of a fat acceptance movement by outlining a wide-ranging overview of

fictional fat depictions in the novel since the 1965 to 2013. This chapter establishes the significance of the novel form to fat depictions, and fat women's depictions in particular.

To explore the significance and subtleties of bodily journeys I focus on texts that speak to important shifts in fat representations, while making connections to other contemporaneous novels and understandings of fatness in each chapter. The journeys in Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle*, Wally Lamb's *She's Come Undone*, Susan Stinson's *Venus of Chalk*, and Lionel Shriver's *Big Brother* illuminate ways in which writers have evoked, but also refused and complicated, the arc of a triumphant weight loss narrative. I have chosen representative texts that interrogate the idea of fatness as unfixed and deconstruct the conception of transformation as a radical re-connection with one's body and the world. My rationale is shaped by a desire to establish transformation and the bodily journey as a critically self-aware theme of fat representations that recurs, evolves, and engages in interesting ways the increasing pathologisation and politicisation of fatness in the late-twentieth- and twenty-first centuries.

In the first two detailed textual analyses I focus on late twentieth-century novels and weight loss as a metaphor for social and psychological transformation. Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle,* the novel I study in Chapter Two, is notable for its focus on a fat woman character's relationship with size and self-loathing from childhood to maturity. Atwood deploys a satirical and wryly ironic approach to protagonist Joan's character arc— from a fat girl to a thin and successful romance writer and a wife. The depiction of self-transformation and change through protagonist Joan's repeatedly changing identities and "rebirths" positions this novel as an ur-text for later resistant formulations of fat fiction. In particular, I explore how

Joan's alienated childhood desire for normativity and her fixation on fantasy frustrates her *Bildungsroman* and journey to maturity. Drawing on the ideas of Kathryn Bond Stockton and Jack Halberstam who discuss normative time and "queer childhoods", I argue that Joan's retrospective narration of her childhood is an attempt to affirm her story of "rebirth" following weight loss by othering her fat child body as grotesque, sexually transgressive and prematurely aged.[51] I build on the idea of the grotesque as a "stunting" performance outlined by Mary Russo to argue that Joan's opportunities to reflect and learn are frustrated by her self-erasing "domestic" performance of heteronormativity and her investment in the heterosexual plots of gothic romances that keep her stuck in a cycle of repetition.

Wally Lamb's *She's Come Undone*, the focus of Chapter Three, is a coming-of-age story where weight loss is an indicator of social improvement, an individual's ability to fit into society, and psychological wellbeing. It exemplifies a prominent but understudied character type – the sorrowful, angry, but nevertheless resilient fat girl character particularly prevalent in fictions of trauma and abuse. It is now being considered as an ur-text for a different development within fat fictions as signaled in reviews of Mona Awad's *13 Ways of Looking at a Fat Girl* (2016) about a fat woman character called Lizzie, with Lamb's character Dolores Price identified as the literary predecessor.[52] Despite Lamb's *She's Come Undone* epitomising a larger societal shift towards weight loss as a signifier of psychological health, the novel has yet to receive critical attention in studies of fatness. Lamb's depiction of weight loss in conjunction with the easing of painful histories is crucial for understanding the evolution of

[51] Stockton, *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (Duke University Press, 2009); Halberstam, *In A Queer Time and Place* (New York University Press, 2005).
[52] Rachel Charlene Lewis notes in her review for the Los Angeles Review of Books: "If Lizzie has a precursor in literature it is Wally Lamb's Delores [sic] (*She's Come Undone*), but Lizzie is less wimpy and sad and more bitter and biting". See Rachel Charlene Lewis, "Fat Girl as Humanized Disaster." *Los Angeles Review of Books* (18 April 2016) https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/fat-girl-humanized-disaster/ (accessed 15 August 2017).

fatness as a metaphor for social and psychological conditions and his dark humour has been noted.[53] This chapter examines how Lamb reworks metaphors of consumption and time travel in Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* associated with Lolita's powerlessness to explore the impact of abuse. The fat girl's body makes visible the violence and trauma of abuse and her weight loss represents a form of psychological wellbeing. Although this is a grim metaphor, this deeper connection to abused girls in fiction encourages a re-evaluation. The abused fat girl character, and her journey of weight loss and recovery, represents the symbolic excavation of difficult familial history as well as tragic literary figures.

Subsequent chapters focus on twenty-first century fiction and the (im)possibilities of size acceptance. Chapter Four examines the narrative journey toward body acceptance and a sense of community in Susan Stinson's *Venus of Chalk*, analysing how Stinson embraces the road trip narrative to explore the intersection of fat experience with sexuality and geographical space. Stinson is well-known as a fat activist but her career as a writer of lesbian fictions has received only cursory mention in fat studies. This is a significant gap in scholarship when her novels develop an alternative symbolic counter-imaginary for fatness that does not rely on ideas of fatness as sick, ugly, or unlovable. I focus on protagonist Carline's journey towards size acceptance in this road narrative because in *Venus of Chalk* Stinson explores the difficulty of totally accepting one's body in a world that is antagonistic. This bodily journey is less concerned with weight loss than physical movement, from Massachusetts to Texas, and moments of bodily change are located in healthy

[53] Julie Klam also notes the connection between the two books in her review: "The way food and body image define Elizabeth's life is depressing and sad. But the book is neither. There is so much humor here — much of it dark, but spot on, like Dolores in Wally Lamb's 'She's Come Undone' or Lena Dunham in 'Girls'". See Julie Klam, "'13 Ways of Looking at a Fat Girl': Stories of a life defined by weight" *The Washington Post* (22 February 2016).

physicality, like swimming and walking and involves enjoyment of the fat body's strength and power. Building on Alexandra Ganser's argument that women's road narratives either dissolve the duality between the road and domestic space, or depict a quest for the ideal home, I argue that neither the road nor the domestic home is presented as ideal in *Venus of Chalk*. Instead, Stinson invests in a positive relationship with nature, history, and art that is mobile and shifting for her character. Alongside this I consider Carline's story as both a road and "domestic" narrative in the ways in which Stinson buries a psychoanalytic mother-daughter narrative in less overt terms. Drawing on Norman Holland's concept of story of fantasy, I suggest Stinson's novel is doubly rewarding for presenting a struggle and resolution of a maternal conflict in a fat-positive and queer story. Carline's embodied journey is also complex and circulatory, with Stinson refusing a simplistic tale of size acceptance.

Lionel Shriver's *Big Brother* with its brutal descriptions of the super-obese Edison is a corollary to Stinson's fat-positive counter-imaginary, through which I examine the sometimes unlikely commonalities between depictions of fatness in twenty-first century fiction.[54] Although the novels by Shriver and Stinson seem to be far apart in tone and politics, they both refute a transformational story of weight loss and concludes with a message of size acceptance, albeit one with caveats. Drawing on Rob Nixon's theory of "slow" ecological violence, this chapter argues that Shriver depicts Edison as a toxic contaminant in Pandora's home and a threat to the family unit as a way to explore fears about fat in the moment that an "obesity epidemic" was news. That Edison is a threat is reinforced in a sequence where Pandora imagines what might have happened had she sacrificed the time and energy to help Edison

[54] According to the Centre for Disease Control and Prevention "super obese" is classified by an individual whose Body Mass Index (BMI) is 40 or higher. Interestingly, recently the term super obese has fallen out of popular medical discourse, replaced by the term Class 3 Obese.
See: https://www.cdc.gov/obesity/adult/defining.html (accessed 15 August 2017).

recover and lose weight. She imagines Edison succumbing to a destructive appetite regardless of the lengths to which she goes to help him, as an attempt to assuage her guilt for her inaction prior to her brother's death. Shriver critiques the fatalistic thought that has emerged around obesity and the (im)possibility of a super-obese person's recovery and shines a light on the hyperbolic panic around an obesity epidemic, doom and death.

The individual character journeys examined in this thesis are not mutually exclusive but overlap and intersect, with dominant themes coming to the fore in different texts and periods that change and diversify the meaning and representation of what a transformational bodily journey may be and portend for fat woman characters. Shifts in genre offer a way into thinking about how fat is imagined, how fat representation changes, and how bodily change as a larger symbolic plot resonates differently in different cultural moments. By focusing on texts written in different styles, I draw out their similarities, developments and overarching dialogues, to uncover how fictions of fatness may begin to be understood as a subgenre of contemporary fiction, especially fiction by women writers, and contributing to existing scholarship on narratives of self-control and bodily autonomy with fat studies as a primarily creative cultural form.

Chapter One

Fatness in Activism and Scholarship: Fatness in the Social and Literary Imagination since the 1960s

To understand the centrality of the bodily journey to fictions of fatness, it is necessary to outline the history of the fat acceptance movement and how this form of activism has responded to medical and social discourses around fatness. The novels in this thesis reflect, engage, and sometimes intersect with this activist history, in the United States in particular. Crucially, the early organisational efforts of fat-acceptance activists in the 1960s defined political and constructivist understandings of fat that are reflected in the novels selected for detailed examination in this thesis. Fat fiction explores the issues which these early activist groups highlighted on human, emotional, and symbolic levels. The roots of the journey in fictions of fatness are interconnected with the key issues and seminal protest texts of this early wave of activist endeavours.

Section One offers a closer reading of scholarly and activist histories of anti-fat prejudice, discussing sociological studies of fatness and the emergence of the fat acceptance movement. This section outlines the politicisation of fatness, and problematises the concept of 'coming out as fat' as a form of body self-acceptance. Section Two outlines the development of fat studies as a field in conjunction with the "global obesity epidemic" in the late 1990s. I analyse the emergence of the fat female body as a site of study and social meanings and conflicts. The final section outlines the three waves of fictional representations of fatness since 1965 that depict a thematic and literary developments, from domestic-focused *bildungsromans* and

stories in the 1960s and 1970s, to more generically diverse "heroic" depictions from the 1990s, to more reserved, ambiguous literary depictions from the mid-2000s. This chapter places these textual developments into conversation with the wider intellectual traditions and political cultures, giving a better understand of the growing complexity, diversity and 'literariness' of fictional developments as intertwined with and offering an insight into fat as a cultural, political and national issue.

The Emergence of Fat Activism as a Movement

Fat as a serious topic of academic study

Analysing fatness in contemporary culture involves engaging with a long history of fat stigma and prejudice in North America. The fat acceptance movement emerged in the United States in the 1960s when fat prejudice and weight discrimination were beginning to be discussed as systemic by sociologists. Briefly outlining what fat prejudice is and how it was addressed in the 1960s establishes the context out of which bodily journey narratives begin, and explains why so many of their central characters feel at odds with wider culture. In this sense, journey narratives refer to a literary theme but also to a cultural reality that the fiction explores. An early study of anti-fat prejudice was published in the *American Sociological Review* by S. A. Richardson et al in 1961. They asked 600 children in public school and summer camp settings to rank six pictures of children with varying physical characteristics or disabilities in order of who they would most like to have for a friend.

Ranked last was a picture of an obese child.[1] The researchers concluded that, even at an early age, obesity was seen to be the fault of the child by their peers, the result of being greedy, weak, and lazy. These findings were far from unique. In 1968,

[1] S. A. Richardson, N. Goodman, A. H. Hastorf and S. M. Dornbusch, "Cultural uniformity in reaction to physical disabilities" *American Sociological Review* 56 (1961), 241-247.

"A study of social stereotype of body image in children" by J. Staffieri found that boys as young as six and seven consistently stated they wanted to look like muscular body silhouettes and assigned unfavourable adjectives to larger bodies including words like "sloppy" and "sneaky".[2] When Staffieri conducted a similar project with girls aged seven to eleven in 1972, he found the same results.[3] These early studies began to illustrate how fat-prejudicial ideas are formed and internalised in US culture from a young age. And in 2003 there was an increase in prejudice against obese children compared with the findings from 40 years earlier.[4]

Prejudicial conceptions of fatness feed into broader experiences of discrimination. In "Obesity: Its Possible Effect on College Acceptance" (1966), Helen Canning and Jean Mayer found that regardless of equivalent application rates and academic performance, obese applicants were significantly less likely to be accepted into college compared to their peers.[5] This difference was accentuated in Ivy League schools where their chance of admission was almost cut in half. In a *New York Times* article "There Are a Lot of People Willing to Believe Fat Is Beautiful..." (1970), William Fabrey, the founder of an organisation for campaigning for civil fat rights, the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance (NAAFA), pointed out that little-known discriminatory policies existed in some Ivy League schools to exclude fat people entirely.[6] Fabrey, a thin man himself and self-described "fat admirer", observed that when he was a student at Cornell University he could not meet women

[2] J. R. Staffieri, "A study of social stereotype of body image in children*" Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 7 (1967), 101–104.
[3] J.R. Staffieri, "Body build and behavioral expectancies in young females" *Developmental Psychology* 6 (1972), 125-127.
[4] Janet Latner and Albert Stunkard replicated this study among 458 fifth- and sixth-grade students. See, Janet Latner and Albert Stunkard, "Getting Worse: The Stigmatization of Obese Children" *Obesity* 11.3 (2003), 452-456.
[5] Helen Canning and Jean Mayer, "Obesity: Its Possible Effect on College Acceptance" *The New England Journal of Medicine* 275 (1966), 1172-1174.
[6] Judy Klemesrud, "There Are a Lot of People Willing to Believe Fat Is Beautiful..." *New York Times* (18 August 1970).

he preferred because Cornell seemed to have a policy against admitting fat students. He claimed that one of the reasons was the belief that overweight students would not be able to climb the steep hills of Ithaca, New York.

Stereotypes around fatness impacted access to job opportunities, and were even explicitly invoked as causes for dismissal in the 1960s. The inescapability of often unashamed weight prejudice in many areas, notably education and employment, is a tension in fat fiction that explores the debilitating effects of this early pigeonholing. Although the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibited employers from discriminating against applicants or employees based on race, colour, religion, or sex, fat people were not considered a protected class.[7] In 1967, two teachers took their school boards to court for discrimination when they were dismissed for weighing more than a standard set by the board of examiners. The contradictory findings in each case made the news. Nancy Parolisi, who weighed 221 pounds, was told in court she could "remain on the job" but Judith Chester, who weighed 214 pounds, was considered "too fat to teach".[8] Although Parolisi won her right to continue working for the board that specified she was "76 percent overweight by its standards", the case reveals that employers felt within their rights to draw on body size to make judgements about a person's capacity to do their job.[9] In 1967, a judge felt it was necessary to declare, "Obesity, standing alone, is not reasonably and rationally related to the ability to teach or to maintain discipline" and to evoke former President

[7] Efforts to tackle weight discrimination have been overwhelmingly unsuccessful because there is a lack of recognition of fat as a stigmatised identity in legislation. Some have attempted to seek legal recourse under the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 or the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (collectively, the ADA), which protect against discrimination based on mental or physical disabilities in a variety of settings. Jennifer Pomeranz and R.M Puhl, "New developments in the law for obesity discrimination protection" *Obesity* 21.3 (2013), 469-471. More effective legislation has appeared in tandem with classification of obesity as a disease in 2013 by the American Medical Association (AMA).
[8] "Puzzle: When is a Teacher Too Fat in N.Y." *Chicago Tribune* (23 December 1967) 6, Section 1A.
[9] Ibid., 1A.

William Howard Taft as an example of fat people's capacity to maintain a "busy schedule" without succumbing to sick days.[10] The teachers' experiences are not exceptional but rather, as fat acceptance advocate Shirley Stoler observed in 1970, commonplace. "Almost all overweight people have been turned down for jobs at one time or another," Miss Stoler claimed, "I couldn't get a job at Con Edison once because they said I was too heavy for their group insurance policy".[11]

While discrimination and social harassment play a significant role in the origins of the fat acceptance movement, the movement's role in seeking better treatment cannot be overstated, particularly where fat prejudice was experienced in health and medicinal care through the association of fat with self-inflicted sickness, a theme that is also evident in fictions of fatness. In 1969, George L. Maddox and Veronica R. Liederman, for example, studied the biases of 100 physicians and clerks in a medical clinic. Obese patients were considered unintelligent, unsuccessful, inactive, and weak-willed, and to a lesser extent ugly, unhappy and awkward.[12] In addition, physicians indicated that they preferred not to treat patients who were overweight and did not expect them to take responsibility for the management of their health conditions. Prejudicial attitudes in medicine often left patients reluctant to go to the doctor when they were ill because their ailments were attributed to their weight and the solution to weight loss. The breakdown of trust between patients and physicians creates a vicious cycle where illnesses may worsen because medical professionals are avoided. In the mid-twentieth century period, the fat body was considered a problem that required treatment in and of itself and that assumption was

[10] Ibid. 1A.
[11] Klemesrud, "There Are a Lot of People Willing to Believe Fat Is Beautiful..."
[12] G.L. Maddox, K.W. Back and V.R. Liederman, "Overweight as social deviance and disability" *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 9.4 (1969), 287-29. The actual percentages are 97 percent stupid, 90 percent unsuccessful, 90 percent weak, 86 percent lazy, 69 percent not nice, 65 per cent unhappy, 60 per cent weak-willed, 54 per cent ugly, and 55 percent awkward.

absorbed into culture more widely. The 1950s saw the initiation of operations designed solely to address weight loss, at the risk of causing serious, even fatal results. Between the 1960s and 1970s, an early version of gastric bypass surgery was involved re-organising the small intestine but the results could be deadly and it had to reversed. The surgery was discontinued by 1980.[13] The increase in surgical weight-loss procedures is a particularly stark example of the increasingly dangerous and extreme methods being promoted for weight loss at the expense of overall health and evidence of the social stigma that was being attached to fat individuals, especially in North America. The constellation of social stigmatisation, inequality, discrimination, and medical mistreatment spurred groups of fat citizens in the U.S. to demand fairer treatment and to actively advocate for the right to dignity and respect. In the same period, novelists began to explore the corrosive psychological and emotional impact of these issues.

Fat is a political issue

Although its grassroots style of activism makes it difficult to chart the fat activist movement's earliest milestones, the first documented activity in the history of the fat acceptance movement was in 1967 when a "Fat-in" was staged in New York's Central Park. The "Fat-in," so called by organiser and radio personality Steve Post, was designed to protest anti-fat prejudice and discrimination that associated fatness with laziness, gluttony, greed, immorality, ugliness, stupidity, and a lack of willpower and self-control.[14] The protest consisted of a group of 500 people eating, and carrying

[13] Dushyant Singh, Alexandra S. Laya, Wendell K. Clarkston, and Mark J. Allen, "Jejunoileal bypass: A surgery of the past and a review of its complications" *World J Gastroenterol*, 15.18 (2009), has examined the various devastating complications from this surgery, discontinued in 1980. Singh notes how patients with Jejunoileal bypass (JIB) usually die of complications or undergo reversal of their surgery.

[14] For the history of the Fat-Acceptance movement and the role of NAAFA see, Dan Fletcher, "The Fat-Acceptance Movement" *Time* (31 July 2009).

placards with photographs of Sophia Loren (chosen because this beautiful actress was famous for her supposedly ample figure). They also burned diet books. The "Fat-in" was the start of a mass movement that would critique diet culture and negative associations of fatness, and has echoed in fiction ever since.

The "Fat-in" of 1967 brought attention to the subject of fat discrimination and prejudice, and led to the creation of the National Association to Aid Fat Americans, which evolved into the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance (NAAFA).[15] When William Fabrey founded it in conversation with Llewellyn (Lew) Louderback who published a controversial essay in *The Saturday Evening Post* entitled "More People Should be FAT", five months after the "Fat-in" in 1967.[16] Louderback's piece is probably the first defence of fat people to appear in the mainstream media, and this article, along with his book *Fat Power: Whatever you Weigh is Right* (1970), articulated many of the key goals for fat acceptance that persist to the present.[17] In Louderback's formulation, anti-fat prejudice was fostered by the media and indirectly provided healthy profits for the medical, fashion and diet industries. Louderback challenged truisms about size that perpetuated a cultural narrative of being "thin at any cost", and critiquing diet culture and medical discrimination. Both Louderback and Fabrey entered the fat acceptance movement by intervening in the discrimination experienced by their wives and noted how heavy fat prejudice fell on women.[18] The

[15] From the Civil Rights movement to the Stonewall riots and the burgeoning second wave feminist movement, the 1960s is a decade known for its "rights revolutions". Fat acceptance is another aspect of the rights revolution that is influenced by, and intersects with, these other movements, but is often overlooked. Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (New York: Bantan Books, 1987).
[16] Llewellyn Louderback, "More People Should Be FAT" *Saturday Evening Post* (4 November 1967), 10-12.
[17] Llewellyn Louderback, *Fat Power: Whatever You Weigh Is Right* (Oregon: Hawthorn Books, 1970).
[18] Charlotte Cooper notes in her personal correspondence with Louderback that the article was fuelled by his outrage at his wife's experiences as a fat woman. See, Charlotte Cooper, "Fat Lib: How Fat Activism Expands the Obesity Debate". In, Emma Rich, Lee F. Monghan, Lucy Aphramor (eds) *Debating Obesity Critical Perspectives* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), 170.

early days of NAAFA had an inclusive membership of people of all sizes who joined to fight the discrimination experienced by fat people.

The organisation began with an agenda for social change, as Fabrey explains in an interview in 2001: "I wanted to make the world a safer and more pleasant place for persons of size, and for them to like themselves better, and lastly, and less important, for nobody to tell me what my taste should be".[19] The early days of the organisation were a struggle; he was politically inexperienced, and the group was attempting to develop unheard-of new ideas with a board of directors that seemed fragmented, and a membership who appeared depressed, directionless and without hope. The organisation struggled to actualise or maintain a political focus and when the board decided to expand its social function by developing a dating service, it was not only Louderback who left, but more radical factions. NAAFA struggled to satisfy the desires of a diverse membership but this organisation popularised "fat" as a preferred descriptor of large bodies and instigated a move away from medical language that described fatness as "obesity". In fat studies criticism, fatness is the preferred term for both activists and scholars alike because it is a more open and less value-laden word than "obesity".

In 1973, a feminist group, The Fat Underground (FU), was formed developing out of the lesbian feminist and radical therapy scene in Los Angeles and put fat acceptance into a broader political agenda. FU disseminated its ideas of size and sizeism through the media and must be considered key to the contextual backdrop for fictions published in the 1970s. FU began as a radical chapter of NAAFA but split off and became independent when NAAFA expressed concerns about the promotion of a

[19] Quoted in Charlotte Cooper, "Fat Lib: How Fat Activism Expands the Obesity Debate", 171.

stronger activist philosophy.[20] It was also inspired by the Radical Therapy Collective, a feminist group founded by Sara Fishman (then Sara Aldebaran) and Judy Freespirit, and sought to integrate feminist politics with fat acceptance, threatening NAAFA. In 1998, Freespirit recalled the FU's relationship with NAAFA was "like the Black Panthers working with the NAACP," that NAAFA's "idea of activism" was "to go to the Cerebral Palsy Foundation and do volunteer work so that people would say that fat people are nice." Whereas "Ours was to demonstrate – break into a university lecture hall at UCLA during a class on behavior modification (for weight loss) and take over the classroom".[21] The Fat Underground took issue with what they saw as a growing bias against fatness in the scientific community. They coined a slogan, "a diet is a cure that doesn't work, for a disease that doesn't exist".[22] In 1975, they published a Fat Liberation Manifesto that declared: "The Fat Underground confronts the double oppression of fat women in society through our nutritional, psychological and politically radical analyses of our condition which dispute all present myths about fat".[23]

Studies on workplace discrimination and size begin to emerge in 1970s that contributed new insights into anti-fat prejudice and how it was growing. Conducting interviews with a group of employers in 1976, D. Roe and K. Eichwort in found sixteen percent would not hire obese low income women under any circumstances

[20] Sara Golda Bracha Fishman, "Life in the Fat Underground" *Radiance: A Magazine for Large Women Online* (1998). http://www.radiancemagazine.com/issues/1998/winter_98/fat_underground.html (accessed 17 August 2017).
[21] J.E. Relly, "The Big Issue: A Fat-Acceptance Movement Welcomes America's New Majority" *Tucson Weekly* (5 October 1998).
[22] Quoted by Charlotte Cooper, "Fat Lib: How Fat Activism Expands the Obesity Debate", 173.
[23] Ibid., 173.

and an additional 44 percent would only hire fat people under special circumstances.[24] A study in 1974, when salaries were lower, revealed that only nine per cent of executives who earned $25,000-$50,000 were more than 10 pounds overweight, whereas 39 per cent of those earning $10,000-20,000 were overweight.[25] The authors calculated that each pound of fat cost an executive $1,000 per year. In 1979, Larkin and Pines found that fat men and women were less likely to be recommended for employment by college students who watched them performing tasks in an identical fashion to their thinner counterparts.[26]

The 1970s was a key cultural moment when gender and size were increasingly and visibly interlinked in fat feminist activism when the FU made its public debut. It was at the Women's Equality Day celebration in 1974 where members hosted a vigil for the recently deceased singer "Mama" Cass Elliot who had died of a heart attack likely triggered by a fasting diet that caused her to lose 80 pounds rapidly although derogatory rumours circulated in the media that she had choked to death on a ham sandwich.[27] In a reflection in FU's activities, one member, Vivian Mayer, recalled how Lynn Mabel-Lois, a medical librarian who penned much of the movement's anti-diet literature, took to the stage to celebrate Cass's life and accused the medical establishment of "committing genocide against women".[28] This vigil was the first public protest against the medical establishment for its mistreatment of women of size. FU later held workshops, produced more literature, staged protests outside

[24] D. Roe and K. Eichwort, "Relationship between obesity and associated health factors with unemployment among low income women" *Journal of the American Women's Medical Association* 31 (1976), 193-204.
[25] "Fatter Execs get slimmer paychecks" *Industry Week* January 14, 1974, 21-24.
[26] Larkin and Pines, "No Fat Persons Need Apply: Experimental Studies of the Overweight Stereotype and Hiring Preference" *Journal of Work and Occupation* 6.3 (1979), 312-327.
[27] Farrell, *Fat Shame* (New York University Press, 2011), 144. For more on Mama Cass Elliot see, "Pathologist raises query on 'Mama' Cass death" *The Times*, 1974. "Inquest told obesity led to 'Mama' Cass death" *The Times*, 1974. Death certificate posted at http://www.findadeath.com/Deceased/e/Cass%20Elliot/DC.JPG (accessed August 17, 2017).
[28] Vivian Mayer, "Forward". In, Lisa Schoenfielder and Barb Wieser (eds.) *Shadow on a Tightrope: Writings by Women on Fat Oppression* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books), xv.

weight loss clinics, and aligned with other feminist causes, including one memorable occasion in 1975 where, as part of a rally protesting crimes against women, Mabel-Lois denounced weight-loss surgery and starvation diets as part of a world-wide pattern of "violence based on sexism".[29]

The fat acceptance movement was coordinated but suffered difficulties in getting materials published, which inhibited the development of a national fat liberation movement and led to isolated pockets of groups that hinged largely on the efforts of a small group of individuals. FU disbanded in 1979 largely as a result. Shortly afterwards, Fishman moved to Connecticut where, with Karen Scott-Jones, she founded the New Haven Fat Liberation Front, an organisation similar to FU in its scope and focus. Fishman began to tackle the problem of isolation characterising fat activism by starting Fat Liberator Publications in 1978 to disseminate political literature. By the early 1980s, fat feminist activists had made several significant gains, staging their first national conference in 1980, and lobbying the publishing collective of the iconic feminist health tome *Our Bodies, Ourselves* (1973), originally published as a series of pamphlets, to reissue its anti-fat and pro-diet stance and to include fat liberation resources.[30] During the 1970s and 1980s, the collective's critique of medicine broadened, taking into consideration differences across class, race, sexual orientation, disability, age and, of course, size. Susan Wells notes that while the publication had previously included individual examples of problematic relationships between male doctors and female patients, the collection gradually incorporated

[29] Ibid., xv.

[30] Fourteen fat activists attended the feminist conference. Judith Stein of Boston Fat Liberation successfully lobbied the publishing collective of *Our Bodies, Ourselves*. Zora Simic, "Fat as a Feminist Issue: A History" in Helen Hester and Caroline Walters (eds) *Fat Sex: New Directions in Theory and Activism* (London and New York: Ashgate Publishing, 2015), 19. Boston Women's Health Book Collective. *Our Bodies, Ourselves* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2011 [1973]). The 1973 book was a collection of a pamphlet of resources pulled from co-ops of women in and around Boston, Massachusetts.

critiques of the broader medical system.[31] In this consolidating phase of fat liberation, the movement's energies were directed towards raising awareness of fat politics within feminist circles as much as fighting fat oppression and discrimination in the wider society and its institutions.

To understand contemporary representations of fatness in North American fiction, it is useful to return to material produced by FU to appreciate how an alternate model of fatness was being imagined and disseminated at the beginning of the fat acceptance movement. In 1983, the members of two groups (FU and New Haven) collaborated to publish an influential anthology defining the field of fat activism, *Shadow on a Tightrope: Writings by Women on Fat Oppression*, a collection of several fat activist position papers that were initially distributed by the Fat Underground, as well as poems and essays by other writers. Edited by Lisa Schoenfielder and Barb Wieser, the collection comprises 35 essays, poems, stories, oral histories, and personal essays, encompassing everyday experiences of navigating social spaces and harassment, medical experiences. They explored what it felt like to grow up as a fat child, to survive as a fat woman, and to become a feminist activist. Throughout, contributors provided material evidence of fat oppression and situated fat women as paradigmatic of women everywhere. Women's fear of fat, argued Mabel-Lois and Fishman, "is a means of social control against women", and the position of fat women reveals "the true position of women in our society": as sexual objects whose sexuality is denied or presumably forfeited when a woman is fat.[32]

Shadow on a Tightrope is important to my study and to wider understandings of fatness because of the multitude of voices that detail the emotionally fraught and

[31] Susan Wells, *Our Bodies, Ourselves and the Work of Writing* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 9.
[32] Lisa Schoenfielder and Barb Wieser (eds) *Shadow on a Tightrope: Writings by Women on Fat Oppression* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books), 54-55.

painful experiences of living in a fat, female body, and tell stories of weight loss and weight gain, fat shame, and an emerging self-acceptance. What sets *Shadow on a Tightrope* apart is its focus on the narrative form of a political, psychological, emotional, and bodily journey characterised by flux, hope, and disappointment. Many of the 35 contributors were white, middle-class lesbians involved in fat liberation and lesbian feminism but points of view were gathered from women of colour, heterosexual women, girls in high school and women discussing ageing. Contributors included working-class women, a woman in a wheelchair, another who was blind, and in the case of "Nancy", a woman suffering both bulimia and anorexia.

The literature included in *Shadow on a Tightrope* focuses on journeys that range from stories of childhood and growing up, to coming out and finding lovers, to developing a political consciousness and struggling to fit into existing political and social spaces. The political importance of reading women's life journeys is indicated in a section dedicated to this topic called "Growing Up: Memories of Fat Women's Lives" but is a recurring theme throughout. In the story of Terre Poppe, for example, she struggles with poverty and feelings of inadequacy and anger. [33] Kate Allen's poem "Fat in a Blue Tu-Tu" depicts one girl's evolving self-consciousness in a dance class.[34] Histories of circular and debilitating weight loss journeys emerge as another clear theme. Lynn Levy maps her life story by focusing on moments of fatphobia exhibited by parents, doctors, and lovers that she experienced from age six to 36.[35] Lynn Mabel-Lois's personal history of encounters with medical professionals and her relationship with weight loss pills offer a similar snapshot of a hard-earned sense of

[33] Terre Poppe, "Fat Memories from My Life" in Lisa Schoenfielder and Barb Wieser (eds) *Shadow on a Tightrope: Writings by Women on Fat Oppression* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1983), 67-70.
[34] Kate Allen, "Fat in a Blue Tu-Tu" in Lisa Schoenfielder and Barb Wieser (eds) *Shadow on a Tightrope: Writings by Women on Fat Oppression* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1983), 61.
[35] Lynn Levy, "Outrages" in Lisa Schoenfielder and Barb Wieser, (eds) *Shadow on a Tightrope: Writings by Women on Fat Oppression* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1983), 79-81.

body acceptance.[36] In perhaps the most poignant story in the collection, Mabel-Lois describes attempting to overdose on her weight loss pills at age nine only to discover her doctor had prescribed her a placebo. When Elana Dykewomon explores travelling while fat, she illuminates another common theme across the anthology: the desire for community but also the difficulty in finding it, even within feminist and queer circles.[37] In this collection, the bodily journey that I take as my grounding metaphor in this thesis is concerned as a personally political journey that speaks to myriad elements of fat women's experiences of their bodies, authority, and the world.

Fat shame and discrimination existed outside of the US, of course, and similar ideas of fatness were being developed and debated in other countries, with *Shadow on a Tightrope* proving a key text for other groups, even though these groups rarely knew of each other. Critiques of fat oppression were circulating in Canada from at least the mid-1970s. Among the earliest examples I have uncovered is an article called "Fat Liberation: A Wages for Housework Perspective" (1975), published in a Toronto-based radical feminist paper called *The Other Woman*.[38] Wages for Housework member Lorna Boschman argues that fatness should be understood as a refusal to participate in the dominant heterosexual system. While her intervention echoes the Fat Underground, she did not encounter American activists until the 1980s. Elsewhere, there is evidence of Canadian women meeting to discuss Susie Orbach's *Fat is a Feminist Issue* (1978), but these women did not see their work as an extension of earlier American activism either.[39] There are two exceptions. Two Canadian groups sought to ally themselves with the founding American fat

[36] Lynn Mabel-Lois, "We'll worry about that when you're thin" in Lisa Schoenfielder and Barb Wieser (eds) *Shadow on a Tightrope: Writings by Women on Fat Oppression* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1983), 63-66.
[37] Elana Dykewomon, "Travelling Fat" in Lisa Schoenfielder and Barb Wieser (eds) *Shadow on a Tightrope: Writings by Women on Fat Oppression,* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1983), 144-154.
[38] Loran Boschman, "Fat Liberation: A Wages for Housework Perspective" *The Other Women* (1975).
[39] Susie Orbach, *Fat is a Feminist Issue.* (New York and London: Paddington Press, 1994 [1978]).

acceptance organisations. The first, LG5 (Lesbiennes grosses cinq, 1984-92) was a collective of five French Canadian fat lesbians inspired, in part, by *Shadow on a Tightrope*. LG5 member Louise Turcotte first encountered fat liberation ideas at the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival and in the mid 1980s, LG5 translated the "Fat Liberation Manifesto" and other texts from *Shadow on a Tightrope* and published them in a lesbian feminist journal. For LG5, critiques of medicine and dieting took a back seat to challenging the power complex that produced fat oppression.

The second exception was NAAFA which had a presence in Canada, albeit not a very prominent one. NAAFA Canada formed after LG5, and neither group seemed aware that the other existed. As a chapter of the American organization, NAAFA Canada sometimes used their pamphlets, but otherwise there seems to have been no working relationship between the two. Perhaps because of Canada's status as a nation-wide chapter of NAAFA, rather than a separate organisation, it did not fare well. Geography presented a major problem because there were only about two hundred members and they were spread across Canada. A second reason that the group may not have got off the ground was resentment over the perceived reluctance of the American organisation to fund activities in Canada. Canadian NAAFA organiser Helena Spring left the organization and started a Canadian Association for Size Acceptance (CASA) and a glossy magazine, *CANADA Wyde*, but it folded after two years in 1997.[40]

Links between national fat activist groups remained localised but the stories in *Shadow on a Tightrope* articulated a common experience across national borders even though fat activists in Canada, and the UK, otherwise tended to deny or reject the idea

[40] For more on the history of fat acceptance in Canada and LG5 see, Jenny Ellison, Deborah McPhail and Wendy Mitchinson (eds) *Obesity in Canada: A Critical Perspective* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016).

that their work shared links to American organisations. Fat activist and sociologist Charlotte Cooper noted that when fat feminist activist group The London Fat Women's Group emerged in 1985, it was largely independent and operated in isolation from American organisations. However, the group did distribute *Shadow on a Tightrope* in the UK, and it was an inspiration for the group until it disbanded in 1989. In a blog post titled "Shadow on a Tightrope, the book that made me fat", Cooper describes the effect of the anthology on her development as a fat activist in the UK, linking the UK publication of *Shadow On a Tightrope* in 1989 to fat feminism in the UK. "I'm fairly sure that the (UK) Rotunda edition came about in the flurry of activity that surrounded the first London Fat Women's Group," she writes, "I know, too, that the Aunt Lute edition was crucial in enabling fat feminism to travel to different places". Groups operating, knowingly or unknowingly, in isolation led Cooper to suggest that calling fat activism a "movement" is misleading because it implies common aims and objectives.[41] However, what is clear is the resonance of the bodily journeys described in *Shadow on a Tightrope* to quite disparate movements across national borders. In a landmark edition of *Spare Rib* in 1987 called "Fat Liberation", Tina Jenkins and Heather Smith, drew on *Shadow on a Tightrope*, when insisting that fatness be properly recognised as a feminist issue and implored fat feminists to organise, to put fat oppression on the wider political agenda.[42]

While fat studies academics endeavoured to raise the profile of *Shadow on a Tightrope*, it is not broadly known outside of fat studies circles and has not received the critical attention it deserves as a foundational text.[43] Kathleen LeBesco, for

[41] Charlotte Cooper, "Shadow on a Tightrope, the book that made me fat" (8 November 2013) http://obesitytimebomb.blogspot.co.uk/2013/11/shadow-on-tightrope-book-that-made-me.html (accessed 17 August 2017).
[42] Tina Jenkins and Heather Smith, "Fat Liberation", *Spare Rib*, 182, (1987), 14-18.
[43] Cooper says, "it is the book that has had the most influence on me over the years". Cooper, "Shadow on a Tightrope".

example, describes *Shadow on a Tightrope* as "[sending] small shock waves through a community whose primary feature of identification had been shame".[44] Farrell describes the text as a "germinal work in fat activism."[45] This text has been overlooked and Susie Orbach's *Fat is a Feminist Issue* (1978) is credited as the foundational text of the fat feminist movement.[46] *Fat is a Feminist Issue* has been subjected to critique by fat studies scholars and activists since publication for reinforcing the idea that while dieting may be bad, losing weight is still good and that addressing socio-psychological issues helps thinness to be achieved. One reason is that feminist critiques of a fat-phobic sexist society have tended to focus on a compulsory slenderness rather than creating space for the analysis of size in sexism. Orbach, like Kim Chernin in *The Obsession: Reflections on the Tyranny of Slenderness* (1981) and Naomi Wolf in *The Beauty Myth: How Imagines of Beauty are Used Against Women* (1990), theorises gender and weight but as centred on eating disorders, and what Chernin has labelled the "tyranny of slenderness".[47] These critiques are limited, as Kathleen LeBesco argues, because they "exclude the fat-identified subject" and acknowledge only "a subject whose desire to be 'normal' determines her identity".[48] *Shadow on a Tightrope* is more radical for the ways in which it interweaves analysis of size in sexism without making the fat woman — who cannot or does not want to be thin — a shadow in her own cultural history. It is, therefore, influential in my study and more important than more widely-known or

[44] LeBesco, *Revolting Bodies?: The Struggle to Redefine Fat Identity* (Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004), 127.
[45] Farrell, *Fat Shame* (New York University Press, 2011), 147.
[46] For mainstream feminism's embrace of Orbach's *Fat is a Feminist Issue* see Cat Pausé, Jackie Wykes and Samantha Murray (eds) *Queering Fat Embodiment* (London: Routledge, 2014), 2.
[47] Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth: How Imagines of Beauty are Used Against Women* (New York: Random House, 1990); Kim Chernin *The Obsession: Reflections on the Tyranny of Slenderness* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1981).
[48] LeBesco, *Revolting Bodies?* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2004), 16.

acclaimed texts because it focuses on different voices and uneven experiences of fatness which are the issues explore through in fictions of fatness.

The Second-Wave of Fat Acceptance Politics – Activism meets Academia

The proliferation of international fat activist groups in the 1980s, anchored by *Shadow on a Tightrope*, led to fat acceptance moving further into the mainstream in the 1990s. This movement signifies the second of what Charlotte Cooper identifies as the three waves of fat acceptance activism up to the present day.[49] If the first, the "Fat-in" in 1967 to 1989, carved out a politics defined by a focus on health, lobbying, group organisation, and "fat admirers", the second wave peaked between 1990-2000. It represents the continuation of these goals, but includes new objectives in terms of representation, such as expansion into fashion, celebrity culture, and arts and media (specifically magazines, art, photography, and zines). The third wave, which I discuss in more depth in the next section, begins in 2000 when discussions of fatness and health in activism and academia proliferated concurrently with reports of a global obesity epidemic. The 2000s also saw the development of a broader international community of fat people focused on fashion, media and social community largely due to the worldwide web. It is out of second-wave fat activism, though, that more sophisticated theorisations of fat and gender begin to emerge that extend *Shadow on a Tightrope*'s discussion of the constructedness of fat women's bodies and identities in a different direction.

What is missing from Charlotte Cooper's definition of a second wave of fat activism is a recognition of the emergence of fat studies scholarship, which can be traced back to the 1990s. In *The Fat Studies Reader* (2009), Marilyn Wann locates the

[49] Charlotte Cooper, *Fat and Proud: The Politics of Size* (London: The Women's Press, 1998), 141.

emergence of fat studies as a field to an academic conference in 2004: "Fat Attitudes: An Examination of an American Subculture and the Representation of the Female Body" which took place at Columbia University Teachers College.[50] Wann discusses the distinction between "fatness" and "obesity" in different approaches to size research:

> If you believe that being fat is a disease and that fat people cannot possibly enjoy good health or long life, then you are not doing fat studies. Instead, your approach is aligned with "obesity" researchers, bariatric surgeons, public health officials who declare "war on obesity" (Koop, 1997), and the medico-pharmaceutical industrial complex that profits from dangerous attempts to "cure" people of bodily difference…
>
> If you believe that thin is inherently beautiful and fat is obviously ugly, then you are not doing fat studies work either.[51]

"Obesity" discourse embraces the medico-pharmaceutical complex through a reliance on, and perpetuation of, a pathologised understanding of fatness. However, Wann's periodisation excludes academic work published in the 1990s and 2000s that led directly to this conference event. A key publication in early fat studies work is Eve Sedgwick and Michael Moon's "Divinity: A Dossier, A Performance Piece, A Little Understood Emotion" (1990) where they explore fatness as part of a broader discussion of the notion of the "divine" as seen in the performer Divine.[52] It marks the moment when academics began to approach fatness from intellectual and theoretical perspectives rather than out of an activist-led context.

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[50] Marilyn Wann, "Foreword" in Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay (eds) *The Fat Studies Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), ix.
[51] Ibid., xi.
[52] Eve Sedgwick and Michael Moon, "Divinity: A Dossier, A Performance Piece, A Little Understood Emotion" *Discourse* 13.1 (1990), 12-39. Moon and Sedgwick's article has been republished and anthologised several times. See, for instance, Sedgwick's 1993 book *Tendencies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993) and LeBesco's *Bodies out of Bounds: Fatness and Transgressio*n (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001).

Sedgwick and Moon extend the metaphor of "being in the closet" – most commonly associated with someone who identifies as gay or queer but who has not declared their sexual orientation – to fat people. While a fat person will not be able to "pass as thin" the way a queer person may choose to "pass as straight," Sedgwick suggests that it is possible to "speak" your fatness and "come out" as fat. Sedgwick and Moon argue that although fat is "self-evident" it also points to a "secret", a contention they suggest often emerges in queer coming out stories:

> The closet, that is, seems to function as a closet to the degree that it's a glass closet, the secret to the degree that it's an open one. Nonsensically, fat people now live under the same divisive dispensation; incredibly, in this society everyone who sees a fat woman feels they know something about her that she doesn't herself know.[53]

Moon posits that looking at fat people, usually fat women, confers a certain "knowingness" that is unpicked as "understanding of her *will* (she's addicted), her *history* (she's frustrated), her *perception* (she can't see herself as she really looks), her *prognosis* (she's killing herself)".[54] In this formulation, the way to thwart and challenge this "knowingness" is to make a declaration of fatness by coming out as fat, and making a political affirmation that is "a way of staking one's claim to insist on, and participate actively in, a renegotiation of *the representational contract* between one's body and one's world".[55] For Moon and Sedgwick, the social constructedness of fat women provides opportunities for resistance and agency by refusing the "knowingness" that defines fat women. The transformative power of declaring one's own fatness was incorporated into Marilyn Wann's own *Fat! So?: Because You Don't Have to Apologise for Your Size*, the 1997 adaptation of her zine into a book:

[53] Eve Sedgwick and Michael Moon, "Divinity: A Dossier, A Performance Piece, A Little Understood Emotion", as printed in LeBesco's *Bodies out of Bounds* (University of California Press, 2001), 306.
[54] Ibid., 307.
[55] Ibid., 306.

"Reclaiming the word fat is the miracle cure you've been looking for, the magic trick that makes all your worries about your weight disappear… Say it out, say it proud: Fat! Fat! Shake your belly three times and there you are, at home in your body. . ."[56]

Sedgwick and Moon's discussion of the relationship between fatness, society and knowledge, then, is also influential for my study because it explores fat as a construct but argues for the theorisation of self-authorship. Sedgwick and Moon identify in performer Divine a figure who offers "a powerful compensation of some emotional and identity linkages – historically dense ones – between fat women and gay men" and foregrounds "interlocking histories of stigma, self-constitution, and epistemological complication proper to 'fat' women and gay men in this century". [57] The "combination of abjection and defiance" that is particular to the histories of fat women and gay men, "produces a divinity effect in the subject, a compelling belief that one is a god or a vehicle of divinity".[58] This is perhaps what we see in John Waters's garish, bold and defiant depiction of a fat "goddess" in a secular society: a woman who is her *own creation*. The fat goddess refuses normative ways of knowing, and the knowledge others believe they have of her.

"Coming out" as fat, and its use in the fat acceptance movement, has come under criticism, in, for example, Samantha Murray's *The 'Fat' Female Body* (2004) which marks a move towards more ambivalent considerations of the fat body. Murray argues that declaring one's fatness is akin to effecting a false transformation that suggests one can simply elect to overcome a more complex relationship to the body:

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[56] Marilyn, Wann, *Fat! So?: Because You Don't Have to Apologize for Your Size* (Berkeley: Ten Speed Press), 18-19.
[57] Sedgwick and Moon, "Divinity", 295.
[58] Ibid., 295.

> In simply 'choosing' a new and affirmative way of being-'fat'-in-the-world, the fat activist is mobilising a humanist logic of the primacy of the individual, and the power of rationality in overcoming one's lived reality.[59]

Murray takes aim at more overtly activist works that incorporate this logic, in particular Wann's declarative coming out:

> The assumption that informs Wann's thesis is that in naming oneself as 'fat', it is possible to liberate oneself from the public culture of 'knowingness' about the 'fat' body, beyond, and unfettered by, dominant discourses and existing systems of power/knowledge.[60]

For Murray, instead, fat activism based on celebrating fatness and promoting fat pride is flawed because it fails to account for intersubjectivity the difficulty of choosing to be happy with one's body in a world where one is consistently told that one's body is not acceptable. In her view, this results in the erroneous idea that fat people are responsible for their own unhappiness as much as they are shamed for being fat by society. The simultaneous desire for self-authorship explored in *Shadow on a Tightrope* and the (im)possibility of self-authorship suggested by Sedgwick, Moon and Murray informs some of the tensions in the novels this thesis examines.

The Long Development of Fat Studies as a Field

A polarising period: Fat studies and the "obesity epidemic"

The late 1990s and early 2000s constituted a transformative stage in debates around fatness in the U.S. There are two watershed years in which changes in social and academic understanding can be identified. The first is 1997, when the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared a global obesity epidemic, published as a report, in 2000. In this global overview titled *Obesity: Preventing and Managing the Global*

[59] Samantha Murray, *The 'Fat' Female Body* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 108.
[60] Ibid., 110.

Epidemic, the United States fared the worst out of all the developed, wealthy countries with approximately 65 per cent overweight and obese citizens.[61] This declaration gave rise to an increasingly aggressive rhetoric in the U.S. that resulted in the claim, in 2002 by the Surgeon General Richard Carmona, that obesity should be considered "a threat that is every bit as real to America as the weapons of mass destruction".[62] The second watershed date is 2004, when the steady rise in the number of people diagnosed as "obese" and wider social fears about "obesity" led to a field of scholarship emerging to analyse the "obesity epidemic," and a fat "threat" in the U.S., through social and cultural as well as medical and political lenses. In my analyses, these two dates are symbolic of a socio-cultural shift that, concurrently and systematically, waged war over competing meanings and understandings of fatness from the 1990s. It is my contention that North American writers grapple with, and respond to, these concurrent and contradictory understandings of fat and it develops to privilege journeys of self-improvement. To tease out this schematic shift, it is necessary to unpack these flashpoints in the socio-cultural conception of fat.

The "obesity epidemic" is a visible and symbolic moment in the 1990s that signifies a new period of heightened public health anxiety. While the idea that the U.S. population was getting fatter had been reported for several decades, in the late 1990s it was labeled a "global epidemic" and a serious subject of public anxiety. By the early 2000s the popular news media had joined the crusade, rallying public support for the battle with thousands of articles, reports, and stories warning Americans of the dangers of obesity; in a post-9/11 climate of heightened public anxiety, governmental leaders galvanised citizens to get back in control by getting fit.

[61] Charlotte Cooper, "Fat Studies: Mapping the Field" *Sociological Compass* 4.12 (2010), 1022.
[62] "Surgeon general to cops: Put down the donuts", *CNN* (March 2003). http://edition.cnn.com/2003/HEALTH/02/28/obesity.police/ (accessed 12 January 2017).

Shortly after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 the U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services encouraged every American to lose ten pounds "as a patriotic gesture".[63] In 2004, comparisons between obesity and terror were more closely aligned when the Surgeon General announced that the rise in "childhood obesity" was "every bit as threatening to us as is the terrorist threat we face today. It is the threat from within".[64] Discourses emerging in the late 1990s and early 2000s linked size to citizenship like never before.

The conceptualisation of thinness as good health, and fatness as poor health, worked to frame fat bodies and fat subjects as both diseased on an individual level, and as parasitic on a social level, monopolising healthcare resources while failing or refusing their responsibility as good neoliberal citizens to enact proper self-management through weight loss. Fatness was being reaffirmed as a moral failing. As Samantha Murray argues, the discourse of the obesity epidemic not only "mobilised the moral panic that surrounds an epidemic as an urgent imperative for citizens to lose weight", but also produced a rationale for fatphobia in the name of health and nation.[65] Moreover, it worked to make fat bodies into targets for increased monitoring, surveillance, and intervention. At this juncture, the ebullient images in 1980s fiction seem far removed.

The declaration of "war on obesity" was a trigger for many fat activists though and sociologists who interrogated the epidemic as a cultural phenomenon as opposed to a medical phenomenon. Scholars across different disciplines investigated the science of the obesity epidemic on its own terms, challenging the propositions on scientific criteria of truth and drawing attention to the incredible fear-mongering

[63] Robert A. Rosenblatt, "Surgeon General Takes Stern Stance on Obesity" *Los Angeles Times* (14 December 2001), A.41.
[64] "Obesity Bigger Threat than Terrorism?" *Associated Press* (1 March 2004), 2.
[65] Murray, *The "Fat" Female Body* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 20-21.

around fatness in the media since the 1990s.[66] Paul Campos, Abigail Saguy, Paul Ernsberger, Eric Oliver and Glenn Gaesser offer a careful reading of scientific literature that reveals being overweight is not as bad for one's health as the media would suggest, and that there may even be evidence that there are health benefits to being overweight. Yet, as J. Eric Oliver reports, medical articles that mention "obesity" and "epidemic" rose from three in 1994 to one hundred and seven to 2000, to seven hundred in 2004, suggesting the rapidly growing "problem" with fat people.[67] In 2016, that number is well over eight thousand a year.[68] These studies contest the science of the obesity epidemic by revealing how it is shaped by cultural forces and assumptions. Primary criticisms argue that scientific studies lack nuance and reveal anti-fat biases, and that media sensationalism simplifies scientific studies and distorts their findings. Laura Fraser goes further in an analysis of obesity research funding argues that the diet and pharmaceutical industries are bound together in economic self-interest that is invested in reinforcing the idea that fatness is a disease requiring pharmaceutical intervention. [69]

Existing explanations ignore several key shifts in attitudes towards size in the 1990s and early 2000s U.S. culture that also help to explain the obesity epidemic as a cultural phenomenon. The obesity epidemic is as much a cultural backlash to a perceived increasing acceptance of fatness as a medical or cultural phenomenon with

[66] Paul Campos, Abigail Saguy, Paul Ernsberger, Eric Oliver and Glenn Gaesser, "The epidemiology of overweight and obesity: public health crisis or moral panic?" *International Journal of Epidemiology*, 35.1 (2006), 55–60.
[67] J. Eric Oliver, *Fat Politics: The Real Story behind America's Obesity Epidemic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 72.
[68] Figure quoted in a lecture given by Professor Ashely Adamson "Tackling and Reducing Obesity in the UK", Thursday 22 September 2016 during the Inside Government and Public Health conference University of Newcastle.
[69] Fraser in *Losing It: American Obsession with Weight and the Industry that Feeds It* (New York: Penguin Books, 1997) points out that less than one percent of the federal health research budget is dedicated to obesity issues. Therefore obesity research in America is invariably funded by the diet and pharmaceutical industry – those who have the most to gain from conclusions that label fat as a disease requiring medical intervention, 31.

numbers the driver. While Charlotte Cooper has begun to map these broader cultural changes, scholars have overlooked the connection between the "war" on obesity an increased visibility of fat people in the media and culture. This increased visibility of fatness and, by extension, the steps towards accepting that fatness, initiated a cultural conversation about fatness that has led to a re-evaluation of the depiction of gender and size. In this period, there is a distinct creative interest in redefining and reclaiming what fat women's experience looked like. This intersected with, and fed into, the narrative possibilities and bodily journeys of fat women characters.

Into the Mainstream

The 1990s saw a broader shift towards "size-acceptance" as opposed to the more radical fat-acceptance movement. Size acceptance helped to circulate some facets of fat-acceptance activism and they entered into mainstream consciousness. This was largely due to the emergence of the Health At Every Size (HAES) movement which began, in its earliest form, in the early 1990s, and which discussed healthy living without the goal of weight loss.[70] In the 1990s, we can see a cultural shift that begins to acknowledge the person who does not or cannot lose weight as a viable and as-yet untapped consumer base.[71] A range of clothes shops and plus-size fashions emerged, dedicated to catering for fat bodies unlike ever before. By catering to a market of fat people unlikely to lose weight soon, if ever, US culture began to take the fat consumer seriously, not as a work in progress but as a valid, if not valued, member of society.

High profile celebrity spokespeople also emerged in the 1990s who had a considerable impact on fat visibility. A range of celebrities began to talk about their

[70] For non-dieting approaches to care for obese women see, Ellison, McPhail and Mitchinson (eds) *Obesity in Canada: A Critical Perspective* (University of Toronto Press, 2016), 61.
[71] For more on the history of HAES, including their mission statement and organisational past: https://haescommunity.com/.

difficulty with losing weight, such as talk show hosts Oprah Winfrey and Ricki Lake, or alternatively discussed their enjoyment of their fat bodies, such as comedians Dawn French and Jo Brand. Notably, at least in the US context, these discussions also intersected with discussions of violent childhoods, and sexual assault in the case of Winfrey and Lake. Such public discussions reinforced the idea that even extreme wealth and opportunity did not allow some people to achieve and maintain sustainable weight loss, and that deeper psychological traumas and behaviours are difficult to uproot even with all available help to hand. These women became role models who gave voice to the idea that being fat could be part of a successful and fulfilling life.

The visibility of fat people as a consumer base involved fat people beginning to be seen as a growing creative community. The internet had a transformative effect on fat activism because it brought together people who had previously been isolated and enabled new connections and conversations to occur.[72] Accessible publishing technology created an explosion in fat zine culture that started to disseminate ideas about fat identity to a broader and younger audience.[73] These zines created and supported their own communities. For example, GirlFrenzy hosted a No Diet Day celebration, and Living Large consisted of reflections and ongoing conversations between contributors.

The development of a creative subculture around size acceptance can be attributed, in part at least, to efforts to challenge stereotypes of fatness as a lacking self-control, self-esteem, and fulfilment that proliferated in earlier decades. The

[72] The pooling of knowledge and resources on early listservs such as fatdykes and Soc.support.fat-acceptance and Alt.support.big-folks helped to define new online communities of fat people. There was also Fatshionista http://fatshionista.livejournal.com/profile; Fat Studies, Yahoo!Groups, http://groups.yahoo.com/group/ fatstudies/; Marianne Kirby, The Rotund, http://www.therotund.com/; Margitte Leah, http://margitteleah.com/; Tiffany Tucker, Fat Shopaholic, www.fatshopaholic.com/.

[73] Notable examples include *FaT GiRL, Fat! So?* by Marilyn Wann, and Nomy Lamm's zine *I'm So Fucking Beautiful* included in Lisa Darms, Johanna Fateman and Kathleen Hanna (eds) *The Riot Grrrl Collection* (New York: The Feminist Press, 2014).

increased emphasis on self-expression in these subcultures reveals how artistic and cultural representation of fatness become areas of pressing importance in the 1990s due in part to the work of size acceptance activists and fat communities. During this period, the fat woman becomes a politically and culturally significant figure that challenges conceptions of size and of bodily agency, health and success on a national and local level. The increasing visibility of fatness, and specifically fat women's self-expression of lived experience, initiates a shift towards new creative and critical engagements with gender, size and new imaginaries of fat women characters that do not foreground or privilege weight loss.

Fat Women in Literary Criticism

Efforts to redefine fat figures in culture, and specifically fat women, at the turn of the millennium were prevalent in creative communities and literary criticism. Fat studies as an area of academic enquiry emerges out of three intellectual bodies of thought, one of which is the reconsideration of the fat woman in fiction in the early 2000s. In the introduction to *Queering Fat Embodiment* (2014), Cat Pausé, Jackie Wykes, and Samantha Murray posit that fat studies as an identifiable and interdisciplinary scholarly field developed out of two contexts. Firstly, the declaration of the obesity epidemic which established fatness as a North American concern for the new millennium. Secondly, the turn towards "the body" as an important site for interrogating operations of power in cultural studies.[74] They "queer" fat bodies and approaches to fatness by evoking the term queer as a methodology that suggests fluidity, disruption, and the destabilisation of categories as a challenge to societal expectations around fatness. I would add a third context to the development of fat studies: the reappraisal of deviant, grotesque and unruly bodies in feminist theory and

[74] Cat Pausé, Jackie Wykes and Samantha Murray (eds) *Queering Fat Embodiment* (London: Routledge, 2014).

literary criticism. It is out of this context that I identify a history of fat literary scholarship beginning with Patricia Yaeger's work on gargantuan women in southern women's fiction. Yeager's study is one in a series of millennial studies on fat literary representations that emerged in 2000 and 2001 that should be recognised as forging the field. Although the idea of an obesity epidemic and the emergence of fat studies as a field of academic enquiry ushered in a new urgency for the cultural understanding of large bodies, it is important to recognise that literary studies too challenged pejorative discourses around fat as excess and that literary studies has been neglected by fat studies academics.

In *Dirt and Desire: Reconstructing Southern Women's Writing, 1930-1990* (2000), Patricia Yaeger argued that giant and gargantuan white women in southern women's fiction challenge social scripts around femininity, gender, and race that underline the South's self-definition.[75] Drawing on the fiction of Eudora Welty and with reference to Katherine Anne Porter, Zora Neale Hurston, Carson McCullers, Flannery O'Connor, Ellen Gilchrist, and Alice Walker, Yaeger suggests that writers adopt a "grotesque tropology" in the form of the motif of the gargantuan woman in order to challenge the pious, miniaturised southern white woman as representative of racial "purity", Christian values and southern femininity.[76] The white gargantuan woman in her strong and powerful physicality becomes the primary site for "exploring the work of a southern polity in which women are barred from public power but become central players in its symbolic scripts".[77] The most prevalent symbolic script is that of white supremacy and the attendant image of (white) female vulnerability: these gargantuan southern bodies make visible "the terrible effects of

[75] Patricia Yaeger, *Dirt and Desire: Reconstructing Southern Women's Writing, 1930-1990* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2000).
[76] Ibid., 123.
[77] Ibid., 123.

racism – and the work of domination that the white female body performs on behalf of this racism".[78]

Yaeger bases the transgressive potential of the gargantuan southern woman on Mikhail Bakhtin's grotesque and its development by Peter Stallybrass and Allon White. The grotesque body, following Bakhtin, is a body defined by orifices and bodily functions that stand in stark contrast to the ordered "classical" body which is "closed, smooth and impenetrable".[79] While the grotesque body is associated with the lowly, disgusting, and embarrassing, Bakhtin finds both a scene of degradation and renewal in the open body of the grotesque. In the moment of death and creation, it is "a body in the act of becoming … never finished, never completed; it is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body".[80] The gargantuan body resonates with the grotesque and has an oppositional relationship to authority and regulatory social norms. Stallybrass and White develop this argument by focusing on the cultural relationship between the grotesque and power, arguing that "the grotesque returns as the repressed of the political unconscious, as those hidden cultural contents which by their abjection had consolidated the cultural identity of the bourgeoisie".[81] Yaeger develops this idea by focusing on the relationship between the grotesque gargantuan woman as a figure who helps to make visible racial and gendered tensions in the US South.

If the gargantuan woman is powerfully and politically subversive in southern women's fiction, the petite white woman's body is a site onto which gender and racial ideology is projected and where knowledge of the world is invested: "Not only are

[78] Ibid., 121
[79] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World,* trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984 [1965]), 317-318.
[80] Ibid., 317.
[81] Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1986), 8-9.

female bodies used as symbolic sites to demarcate undesired social change, but this symbolism has a diurnal power; it offers a constancy in an inconstant world of crisis and change".[82] The persistence of the miniature white southern lady represents nothing less than knowledge and meaning; she is key to knowledge-making and cultural survival. In contrast, gargantuan women represent inconstancy, crisis, and change the cultural scripts of southern femininity. Discussing the episode in Welty's story "A Memory" when the young protagonist spies a fat lady bathing and laughing with a man, Yaeger shows how the white middle-class girl finds the woman's flesh and the man's attentions disturbing and excessive: "I saw the man lift his hand filled with crumbling sand, shaking it as the woman laughed, and pour it down inside her bathing suit between her bulbous descending breasts".[83] The fat woman's unconcerned bodily display and flirtatious relationship with the man opens the girl's eyes to an unknown adult world: "Welty's giantess is the terrible harbinger of change for a demure southern girl".[84] The gargantuan woman in this story epitomises the confrontation with repulsion and renewal that threatens to disrupt the social order for the girl and the wider community.

In the same year, Sharon Monteith examined the relationship between fatness and whiteness in *Advancing Sisterhood? Interracial Friendships in Contemporary Southern Fiction* (2000), when she explored "dilemmas of commonality and difference" in white writers' depictions of relationships between white and black southern women and girls. Monteith also draws on Bakhtin's and Stallybrass and White's ideas on transgressive grotesque. Monteith examined how interracial friendships were troubling and disturbing for the ways in which white writers contain

[82] Yaeger, *Dirt and Desire* (University of Chicago Press, 2000), 127.
[83] Ibid., 154.
[84] Ibid., 118.

black characters in a monologic formulations that renders her auxiliary and leave her unvoiced or make her words available only through reported speech. One of Monteith's case studies involves the relationship she reads between history, consumption and the body in Carol Dawson's epic family romance *Body of Knowledge* (1994), where the gargantuan central character Victoria Ransom is a "living Ransom text" insofar as she stores a century of Ransom family history that has been "fed" to her in the form of stories by the family's African American housekeeper Viola until she weighs some 600 pounds: "the black family retainer casts her stories for the white girl, who catches their content" until she is weighed down by the burden the servant has been forced to carry on behalf of the family she serves.[85] Victoria is Viola's created text and in her she blends her own painful history with the Ransom family secrets and tragedies that she has carried alone until Victoria's fat body becomes her metaphorical repository. Victoria suffers a "psychocultural illness" in which she gorges herself until she is "gradually filled to bursting with the bitter gall of her family's guilty secrets, as well as the juice of human love".[86]

In Monteith's reading, Dawson subverts and reverses the hierarchal power structures inherent in southern stories of black servants and their white charges by embodying the connection between Victoria and Viola. The usually dominant voice of the white woman is refuted when Viola, a thin and small woman herself, takes charge of the family history and tells it her way. Where, historically, black housekeepers have been defined by gargantuan bodies and rendered voiceless in white family narratives, as Monteith shows, Viola authors this history and feeds Victoria

[85] Sharon Monteith, *Advancing Sisterhood? Interracial Friendships in Contemporary Southern Fiction* (London: University of Georgia Press, 2000), 154, 144.
[86] Ibid., 161.

full with bitterness as well as love: the white woman becomes a spectacle of her making, her grotesque frame a parody of white southern ladyhood.

In Monteith's Faulkerian reading of Dawson's text, Victoria is the mausoleum that contains her family's secrets. She is also the family's only redemptive hope, "doomed to pursue the meaning of her family history if she is to have any success in interpreting her own life as "the end result in a pattern of habits".[87] For Monteith, the relationship between the body and history in *Body of Knowledge* is a story that has to be addressed— and disinterred. In 2000, Yaeger and Monteith examined fat white women characters and their embodiment as a challenge and testament to literary histories in which white femininity and black erasure figured. These studies established a platform for ideas in this thesis by exemplifying how fat white women's bodies occur in fiction as potent sites of political, cultural and social critique.

Fat white women's bodies intertwine with and subvert political and cultural scripts through bodily journeys of transformation in that texts that focus on white fat women whose growing, shrinking, and changing bodies explore and critique narrative arcs of bodily change, self-control, and the idea of triumphant narratives of weight loss. A study of fat bodies in fiction draws into sharp contrast competing conceptions of the "flexible" and "fixed" fat body entrenched in cultural knowledge about fatness, particularly its intersection with race and class. Middle-class and upper-middle-class white women are the primary consumer base for weight loss products because they are perceived as "viable product consumers" with disposable income.[88] While the economic power of middle-class white women is a contributing factor that writers of fiction may keep in mind— as is the immense pressure on all women to engage in

[87] Ibid., 155.
[88] Jennifer Mobley, *Female Bodies on the American Stage: Enter Fat Actress* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 26.

beauty cultures— the way that white women's bodies are perceived as changeable.[89] A study of ambiguous transformations and changing (white) bodies reinforces the idea that fat is not only or always racially-coded according to the southern literary history that Yaeger and Monteith exemplify, but that weight loss transformation is a powerful popular narrative more broadly that is, nevertheless, steeped in conceptions of white femininity.

In twenty-first century literary criticism, there is evidence of a new and dedicated focus on recovering fat characters from the margins of texts or looking at them in new ways. The first concerted effort was Jana Evan Braziel and Kathleen LeBesco's interdisciplinary *Bodies Out of Bounds: Fatness and Transgression* (2001). It questions discursive constructions of fatness while addressing the politics of corpulence and representations of the fat body in the media, popular culture, and fiction. This collection set out to break binaries of desire/disgust that theories of abjection and grotesque were grounded in and that southern women writers were exploring. The most relevant essay in the collection for my study is Sarah Shieff's chapter on US, UK, Canadian and French women's fiction and themes of agency and consumption.[90] Shieff's analysis is useful for approaching fictions of fat through the lens of genre, and in beginning to map representative similarities in fat representations.

Shieff maps a pattern of eating and autonomy in a broad overview of "fat" women's writing from the 1960s to the 1980s and argues that there is an identifiable

[89] Jacqueline L. Hazelton in *Beyond Slavery: Overcoming Its Religious and Sexual Legacies* (London and New York; Palgrave, 2010) has used the example of body modification to explore the 'flexibility' allowed for white women's experimentation and transgressive behaviours that are more precarious for black women.

[90] Sarah Shieff, "Corporeality and Autonomy in Fiction by Women Since the 1960s" in Jana Evan Braziel and Kathleen LeBesco (eds) *Bodies out of Bounds* (University of California Press, 2001), 214-230.

genre for fat representations that includes Atwood's *Lady Oracle*, Fay Weldon's *The Fat Woman's Joke* (1967), Jeanette Winterson's *Sexing the Cherry* and Claude Tardat's *Sweet Death* (1989) and that these novels are representative of a genre she calls the "domestic *bildungsroman*", which focuses on emotional and artistic development away from the close confines of the home and intense matrilineal relationships. The genre she identifies is defined by the relationship between food and text, with a character gradually developing her voice so that it replaces the food she has been consuming: "Locating the mouth as the site of the body/world interface (taking things in, spitting things out), they dramatize their own transition from the private and the domestic to the public".[91] Shieff argues that in developing their voices, the characters she analyses swap the negative, devastating freedom they find in overeating for a more productive and hopeful form of freedom by rejecting the "monstrous" mother who, in the novels Shieff discusses, represents the stifling domestic sphere.

Shieff draws on Mary Russo's theory of the grotesque insofar as she locates subversive potential in the fat female body.[92] When Russo reconsidered popular notions of the uncontained female body, she made a case for positively making room for "the strange, the risky, the minoritarian, the excessive, the outlawed and the alien" in feminist thought.[93] Shieff draws on Russo's reclamation of Bakhtin's "laughing hags": "There is nothing completed, nothing calm and stable in the bodies of these old hags".[94] In them she sees the most positive revaluations of fat bodies in novels that pioneer this kind of grotesque imagery. For example, she identifies Winterson's *Sexing the Cherry* and her gigantic and gigantically strong character Dog-Woman as

[91] Ibid., 225.
[92] Mary Russo, *The Female Grotesque* (New York: Routledge, 1994).
[93] Ibid., vii.
[94] Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Indiana University Press, 1984 [1965]), 25-26.

"the only [novel] that manages a positive valuation of the inordinate female form".[95] In Tardat's *Sweet Death*, Shieff locates strength and subversiveness in female grotesquerie too: "This female grotesque is clever and sassy and she dares to indulge her wild appetites shamelessly and in public".[96] However, she also notes how the grotesque, which focuses on loud, excessive, unbound behaviour and bodies, misses an important aspect of the characterisation: "Russo's paradigm validating the grotesque might tempt one to overlook the anguish of the grotesque heroine".[97] For Shieff, the power in fictional representations of fatness lies in the "capacity to dramatize and interrogate such lived alienation," and identifies "lived alienation" as a thread throughout her cluster of texts: "These novels offer writers and readers not only the opportunity to interrogate lived alienation but also the chance to rehearse in imagination their own ways of being".[98] In examining the ways in which writers imagine ways of being and living in this thesis, I argue that the journey toward finding a voice is also more complex than Shieff implies here.

A selected few women writers and texts have continued to define literary scholarship on fatness whichever approach is taken.[99] In *Food, Consumption and the Body in Contemporary Women's Fiction* (2000), Sarah Sceats analyses fat in the fiction of Margaret Atwood in a broader study of food and eating, including works by Doris Lessing, Angela Carter, Michèle Roberts and Alice Thomas Ellis.[100] For Sceats, women writers evoke food metaphors in order to explore questions of gender, power and control and particularly social relationships of love and pain. In 2008, in *Excess*

[95] Shieff, 218.
[96] Ibid., 222.
[97] Ibid., 220.
[98] Ibid., 226.
[99] Notable exceptions include Andrea Elizabeth Shaw's *The Embodiment of Disobedience: Fat Black Women's Unruly Political Bodies* (New York: Lexington Books, 2006).
[100] Sarah Sceats, *Food, Consumption and the Body in Contemporary Women Writing* (Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 2000).

and Embodiment in Contemporary Women's Writing, Zeynep Atayurt also identified selected texts by Atwood, Fay Weldon, Claude Tardat, and included Judith Moore's memoir *Fat Girl: A True Story* (2005), among works that challenge supposedly "homogenous" depictions of fat, female embodiment and point towards a "new aesthetics of embodiment which celebrates the difference of the different".[101] Atayurt stressed, "While these texts differ in their representation of time and place and literary strategies, they also vary in their treatment of the subject matter". [102] As Judith Moore summarises, "every fat girl has her own fat story".[103] I build on extant studies, by Yaeger, Monteith, Shieff, Sceats and others, and respond to Atayurt's call for more studies of heterogeneous representations of fatness by focusing on journey narratives through which fat representations, beyond consumption, excess and the grotesque, are formulated.

In focusing so closely on a predominantly British canon, Shieff, Sceats and Atayurt may create the impression that the fictional representation of fatness is a predominantly British-led and defined area of exploration, overlooking the sustained critique that took place in US southern studies. Despite Atayurt's claims that she is challenging homogenous representations of fatness, she features only one American author, and she is a memoirist. In focusing on an American memoir, Atayurt's textual choices implicitly suggest that this is a topic to which American writers' most valuable contribution is that of lived experience as opposed to creative or experimental writing and implies that there are no published novels to which she might have alluded. A diverse body of novels are omitted from these studies, including abuse narratives, travel narratives, and, most recently, illness narratives that

[101] Zeynep Atayurt, *Excess and Embodiment in Contemporary Women's Writing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 169
[102] Ibid., 182.
[103] Ibid., 182.

depict the slow and painful loss of super-obese family members and a predisposition to overconsumption. Together, such fictions begin to demonstrate a more complex picture of embodied journeys in the twenty-first century and the age of obesity that has yet to be acknowledged in literary criticism. This thesis also addresses the absence of American fiction in studies of fatness since 2000, a gap in extant scholarship.

Fictional Representations of Fatness: An Outline

Representations of fatness in contemporary fiction are much broader than existing scholarship reflects, and I have identified three distinct periods when depictions of fatness, and specifically representations of fat women, undergo shifts in trend, tone and genre. The first wave can be dated to 1965, when writers begin to explore the intersections of gender and size in terms of conventional ideas of femininity, desirability and domesticity, and featured fictions that focus on the fat girl and suburban wife, usually in grotesque and tragicomic formations. The second wave can be identified in the 1990s, when the number of representations of fat women characters increases dramatically and depictions of fat protagonists proliferate. In this period, fat women characters are strong, surviving personal and societal pressures, and persevere against all odds. The third wave began in the late 2000s, when fat characters began to be depicted as an "everyman" or "everywoman". This overview maps contemporary fiction's increasing engagement with gender, size, and bodily journeys that is at the heart of this study.

Fat girls and unhappy wives

The first wave of fictional depictions of fat women begins in 1965 with the publication of Australian author Christina Stead's novel *The Man Who Loved*

Children, a threshold text in the depiction of fat women characters because it popularised the "ugly duckling".[104] Originally published in 1940, Stead's novel only received critical acclaim when it was reissued by Rinehart and Winston with an introduction by the poet Randall Jarrell in 1965.[105] It focuses on a narcissistic patriarch, Sam Pollit, who rules over his six children with his equally selfish wife Henny. Sam beguiles his children, whom he leaves filthy and deprived, with word games and insults, and enforces his need to be the sun around which the Pollit family rotates. It is his eldest daughter, Louisa, who is a self-identified ugly duckling. Fat, clumsy, slovenly, and very bright, she proves to be the greatest antagonist to Sam's authority. Louisa's fatness and plainness are, arguably, what rescue her from living out her father's delusions, and compel her toward honesty and autonomy. As Louisa develops an infatuation with her tutor Miss Aiden, she gradually breaks away from her father and his spell-binding riddles and secret languages. Louisa does not become a "beautiful swan" but she does break away from her father's hypnotic spell and leaves the family home to strike out on her own.

Stead's depiction of the ugly duckling who seeks escape is a watershed in representations of fatness. After Stead, fat fictions focus more often the constrictions of femininity, the institution of marriage, and the imperative towards thinness. Although there are a few exceptions to this trend, a common theme of this first wave is the suburban wife in a moment of crisis in her marriage, for whom eating and becoming fat represents rebellion.[106] For example, in 1967 in *The Fat Woman's Joke*, British writer Fay Weldon tells the story of Esther Sussman who flees her home – and

[104] Stead, *The Man Who Loved Children* (1965 [1940]).
[105] Jonathan Franzen, "Rereading 'The Man Who Loved Children'" *The New York Times Book Review* (6 June 2010).
[106] For exceptions to this trend, see Jean Stafford "The Echo and the Nemesis" in *The Collected Stories of Jean Stafford* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux,1969); Peter Carey *The Fat Man in History: Short Stories,* (Queensland: University of Queensland Press1974).

the tortuous discipline of a diet – after her husband Alan leaves her for a younger, thinner woman. Esther eats herself into a defiant fatness while ruminating on the wretchedness of married womankind. However, in the end Esther returns to her husband Alan when he begs her to and continues to eat her emotions and be soothed by food because she can see no alternatives. Weldon's novel centres on gender relations and the limitations of women's roles, and the impossibility of imagining a life outside of marriage.

Raymond Carver's short story "Fat" (1971) demonstrates a similar association between fat and resistance to the institution of marriage.[107] "Fat" describes a waitress's fascination with a fat male diner despite the cruelty displayed towards him by those around her. The fat man inspires the tale's ultimate image: the thin narrator's fantasy of herself as an enormously fat woman having sex with her tiny husband. It is an image that, more economically and effectively than anything else in the story, bares the narrator's psyche and despair, which expresses itself as a mixture of passivity and aggression. The narrator's fantasy of herself as fat speaks to the lack of control that she sees in the fat man, who is lost to a pleasure that has turned destructive. By imagining herself growing fat like the diner, the waitress's unhappiness is put into conversation with fatness as a lack of control. The story concludes with the waitress deciding to make a change by breaking away from her marriage. Even narratives depicting happier marriages, such as Leon Rooke's *Fat Woman* (1980), which is a loving and quietly sad story about a wife's struggle with self-worth despite her husband's protestations, end ominously.[108] Rooke's character has grown so large that her wedding ring is cutting off her blood's supply to her

[107] Raymond Carver, "Fat" in *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979). This story was originally published in *Harper's Bazaar* in September 1971.
[108] Leon Rooke, *Fat Woman* (Toronto: Oberon Press, 1980).

finger, which is a real or imagined portentous sign of her deteriorating relationship with her husband, whose love she cannot understand or truly accept because she is fat.

The childhood pressure to conform to gender norms and feminine ideals offsets the constriction of married life and several stories focus on coming-of-age in the form of personal journeys that fat girls make as a result of struggles with overbearing mothers, alienation from cultures of femininity, and fear of lifelong isolation and loneliness. Notable but lesser-known examples that do not focus on marriage include Elana Dykewomon's *Riverfinger Women: A Novel* (1974), a lesbian coming of age story, and Mary Gordan's *Final Payments* (1978), which focuses on difficult mother-daughter relationship that sees the daughter's body growing to mirror an ambivalent maternal figure.[109] The interest in fat girls coincides with a popular cluster of young adult novels, including Judy Blume's bestselling young adult novel *Blubber* (1974), Isabelle Holland's *Dinah and the Green Fat Kingdom* (1978) and Lila Perl Yerkow's *Me and Fat Glenda* (1979).[110] Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle* was chosen as a key text for this thesis because of the ways Atwood explores these themes of coming-of-age, domestic unhappiness and social commentary in a notably ironic and at times comic fictional depictions of a fat girl character in Joan. However, one of the other most widely discussed imaginative works on fat girls in fiction is Andre Dubus's short story "The Fat Girl" (1977), which explores one girl's pressure to conform to thinness from childhood to marriage and motherhood.[111] Although this girl is unable to lose weight in childhood, she eventually succeeds in college through the help of a friend, leading her to find a husband. After several years of marriage, she

[109] Elana Dykewomon, *Riverfinger Women: A Novel* (Buffalo: Daughters inc., 1974); Mary Gordan, *Final Payments* (New York: Anchor Books, 2006 [1978]).
[110] Judy Blume, *Blubber* (New York: Bradbury Press 1974); Isabelle Holland, *Dinah and the Green Fat Kingdom* (New York: Trophy Press, 1978); Lila Perl Yerkow, *Me and Fat Glenda* (Pennsylvania: Clarion Books, 1979).
[111] Andre Dubus, "The Fat Girl" was first published in the collection *Adultery and Other Choices* (Boston: David R. Godine Publisher, 1977).

gets pregnant and subsequently regains her lost weight. Despite her husband's suggestion that she diet, she accepts her weight because motherhood has given her a new sense of self and a different form of social validation. As these tensions rise to breaking point, the marriage ends, with Dubus suggesting there may be a better future for the mother and child outside of the marriage, a more optimistic conclusion for a fat woman character.

In the 1980s, fiction began to reflect fat embodiment, and living happily in a fat body across very different texts published in the US and UK. In *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982), Audre Lorde blended fiction, myth, and memoir to tell a story of embodied selfhood that reflected her experience as a "fat, Black, lesbian, nearly blind and ambidextrous".[112] What she called her "biomythography" took physical difference as a mark of distinction without it becoming grotesque spectacle: "I was fat and black and very fine. We were without peer or category and on that day I was conscious of being very proud of it".[113] If her physical difference is potentially source of a social alienation, she makes it the source of poetic and erotic self-affirmation. Not dissimilarly, in the 1984 poetry collection, *The Fat Black Woman's Poems*, Caribbean-British writer Grace Nichols similarly explores the intersection between race, gender and fatness to affirm a fat-positive identity. She celebrates the fat black woman's sexuality and self-perceived sensuality, and takes aim at the devaluation of fat, black, female bodies evident in Eurocentric white culture. In the poem "Invitation", for example, the fat, black woman has large, ungraspable breasts and her slippery thighs suggest the elusiveness of her sexuality, a result of her

[112]Audre Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 2001 [1982]), 240.
[113] Ibid., 223.

immense body and sexual and cultural independence.[114] Nichols expresses a rejection of Western epistemology that names fatness an abnormality.[115]

Lorde's *Zami* and Nichols in *The Fat Black Woman's Poems* create poetic and erotic imaginaries around fat black women that resist Eurocentric conceptions of beauty and desirability specifically. Another fat black character who epitomises this marginal yet powerful position is made a mystical figure as Miranda "Mama Day" in Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* (1988) and her antagonist Ruby, another spiritual figure is large and steeped in the supernatural: Ruby has "arms and legs almost as thick around as small tree trunks" and "a middle that is as wide as the old oak down by Chevy's Pass".[116] Ruby's size is representative of her magical power and her position in the community, but also of her excessive jealousy and her need for romantic intimacy. As a fat woman character, Ruby is far from celebratory but she is powerful, sexual, and ambiguous, a malevolent foil to the benevolent Mama Day, and a powerful figure and a formidable challenge to racist "Mammy" stereotypes that proliferate in historical representation of fat black women. These writers reimagine fatness as social alienation and isolation towards a different imaginary of fatness that speaks more fondly of sexuality and racial identity.

Another form of positively re-imagining physical difference around largeness that emerged in the 1980s is evident in fantastical large figures whose identities defy categorisation. In *Nights at the Circus* (1984), British writer Angela Carter told the story of circus acrobat with giant wings said to be born from an egg. Fevvers is the star of a travelling circus whose body is described as large and muscular. When the narrator, Walser a journalist, tries to discover if her origin story is true, her already-

[114] Grace Nichols, *The Fat Black Woman's Poems* (London: Virago, 1984), 13.
[115] Ibid., 15.
[116] Gloria Naylor, *Mama Day* (New York: Random House, 1988).

large body seems to grow as his desire grows: "without her clothes on, she looked the size of a house".[117] Fevvers is a powerful image of size, strength and sexuality, countering representations of petite, fragile and passive female sexuality: "Now she looked big enough to crack the roof of the god-hut, all wild hair and feathers and triumphant breasts and blue eyes the size of dinnerplates".[118] Walser's urgency of desire is intertwined with size as beauty. Jeanette Winterson's *Sexing the Cherry* (1989) also features a carnivalesque giantess by the name of Dog-Woman. Set in dual time-zones, the Dog-Woman in the seventeenth century is connected to a young, slim ecologist in the novel's present day. Depicted as both large and grotesque, with pock-marked skin and a flat nose, the Dog-Woman rarely has sexual relationships, and rarely desires them but this is because, she declares: "I am too huge for love. No one, male or female, has ever dared approach me. They are afraid to scale mountains".[119] This is made clear in the episode where Dog-Woman has sex with a man and barely feels his attempts to satisfy her. Both novels explore a counter-erotics by envisioning it through triumphant freakery, creatively intervening in ideas of fat women as sexual, powerful, beautiful in their gargantuan prowess. Grotesque men's bodies appear in novels in this period too, like John Kennedy Toole's loud and comical New Orleans gargantuan Ignatius J. Reilly *A Confederacy of Dunces* (1980) and the large Norman Bombardini in David Foster Wallace's *The Broom of the System* (1987), who is determined to ''fill the universe with Self'' and tries to make himself as large as possible; however, fat women's fantastical bodies are more prevalent.[120] Collectively, such fictions reveal a negotiation of fat women's depiction as isolated and lonely, and depict various ways of exploring gender and size; they also indicate that imaginative

[117]Angela Carter, *Nights at the Circus* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1984), 292.
[118] Ibid., 291.
[119] Jeanette Winterson, *Sexing the Cherry* (London: Vintage, 1990 [1989]), 34.
[120] John Kennedy Toole, *A Confederacy of Dunces* (Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 1980); David Foster Wallace, *The Broom of the System* (New York: Viking Press, 1987), 81-93.

writers have often been at the forefront of examining fatness in complex and inventive ways.

Strong girls breaking the mold

During the second wave of fictional representations in the 1990s, fat girls begin to be depicted with less tragicomic exaggeration, their stories sensitively drawn around serious topics including sexual abuse and familial histories of trauma. Mary Gaitskill's *Two Girls, Fat and Thin* (1991) may be understood as a turning point because it depicts characters who in appearance and background seem nothing alike but who have each experienced childhood sexual abuse that results in an unlikely connection.[121] Justine Shade, a pretty and slender part-time tabloid writer, encounters Dorothy Storm, a follower of an obscure right-wing philosophy. As Justine interviews Dorothy about the philosophy she follows, it is revealed that they are living oddly parallel lives. Despite dramatic differences in class and family, both women are victimised: Dorothy by a sexually abusive father, and Justine by her father's work colleague as well as her emotionally damaging parents. Dorothy finds solace in food, while Justine engages in sex, leading her into increasingly extreme and dangerous situations. The novel concludes with Dorothy saving Justine from a dangerous sexual encounter that is escaping her control.

The strength of fat girl characters is evident in the 1990s with perseverance and will to survive emerging as a central theme. Fat characters in this period often experience intimate violence at an early age but tend to emerge into more optimistic futures. Fat in this context is linked to abuse and makes visible its effects. Even though this tends to reinforce a link between weight gain and abuse, it does locate it

[121] Mary Gaitskill, *Two Girls, Fat and Thin* (New York and London: Simon and Schuster, 1991).

more firmly as a consequence of socio-cultural inequalities, and with male violence as much as female pathology or ambivalent mothering. In fictions of the second wave, epitomised by Wally Lamb's character Dolores *She's Come Undone* (1992), traumatic histories manifest themselves on the body in the form of fat. In Lamb's novel, fat is a symptom of untreated trauma and of buried familial secrets that makes the rape ever-present and visible for Dolores who spends the rest of the narrative repeating and unlearning destructive patterns of behaviour until she finds a community of friends and a man she loves. Similarly, the idea of eating secrets recurs in Carol Dawson's *Body of* Knowledge (1994), where central character Victoria consumes her family history when it is fed to her by her housekeeper and her body expands with the knowledge of her family's scandals and secrets, as well as her housekeepers anger and frustration.[122]

The idea of eating secrets is specifically related to abuse in other stories in the 1990s. In Sapphire's *Push: A Novel* (1996), Precious's mother forces her to eat food scraps when she is not hungry until she feels sick because she feels Precious has "stolen" her husband who has sexually abused his daughter since she was very young.[123] Eating as a metaphor for abuse is taken to an extreme in a short story by Sara Paretsky called "A Taste of Life" (1995), in which 300-pound Daphne literally eats the source of her painful history by killing and cannibalising her cruel mother.[124] The story details Daphne's toxic relationship with a mother who has overfed her as a child and who insults her cruelly throughout her life. Daphne's life begins to improve when she finds a loving boyfriend and in her happiness resolves her problem of emotional over-eating. However, her mother doggedly pursues and then steals her

[122] Carol Dawson, *Body of Knowledge* (New York: Algonquin Books, 1994).
[123] Sapphire, *Push* (New York: Vintage, 1996).
[124] Sara Paretsky, *A Taste of Life* (New York and London: Penguin, 1995).

boyfriend. In response, Daphne lashes out at her mother and kills her. The story ends with Daphne eating her mother's body, a perverse and obscene act that is represented as a form of suicide when the literal separation between mother and daughter disappears: "She wanted to die herself, to eat and eat until she was engulfed by food".[125] As Daphne fills herself up on her mother's flesh, she "becomes" the monstrous mother. Fatness interrelated with trauma is a troubling core theme of fictions in the 1990s but reveals a movement towards socio-cultural depictions of fatness that move away from a lack of willpower as the root cause of a fat character's unhappiness.

As the second wave develops, novels do emerge that emphasise the success as well as the survival of strong fat characters. In the late 1990s, there is a notable shift from the coming-of-age story towards the depiction of fat characters in historical fiction, road narratives, vampire and fantasy fiction and, increasingly, memoirs, short story anthologies, and young adult fiction. For example, Minette Walters's crime novel *The Sculptress* (1993), Elizabeth Neff Walker's romance *An Abundant Woman* (1998), John Varley's fantasy novel *The Golden Globe* (1998), and Alice Randall's historical novel *The Wind Done Gone* (2002).[126] Vampire fiction featuring fat characters include Greg Shelton's *Vampires and Chocolates* (2002) and Andrew Fox's *Fat White Vampire Blues* (2003).[127] The increase in depictions of fatness is also reflected in other creative written forms, like young adult fictions, including Cherie Bennett's *Life in the Fat Lane* (1998) and Kimberly Willis Holt's *When Zachary Beaver Came to Town* (2001), and memoirs, such as Frances Kuffel's *Passing for*

[125] Ibid., 14.
[126] Minette Walters's crime novel *The Sculptress* (London: Pan Books,1993); Elizabeth Neff Walker's romance *An Abundant Woman* (Nottingham: Belgrave House, 1998); John Varley's fantasy novel *The Golden Globe* (Berkeley: Ace Books, 1998); Alice Randall's historical novel *The Wind Done Gone* (London: Houghton Mifflin, 2002).
[127] Vampire fiction includes: Greg Shelton, *Vampires & Chocolates* (Bloomington: Iuniverse, 2002) and Andrew Fox, *Fat White Vampire Blues* (New York and London: Random House, 2003).

Thin: Losing Half My Weight and Finding My Self (2004), Brian Francis's *The Secret Fruit of Peter Paddington* (2005) and Ann Pai's *My Other Body: A Memoir of Love, Fat, Life, and Death* (2006).[128]

A notable early example of this trend is fat activist Susan Stinson's historical fiction *Martha Moody* (1996), which follows the passionate affair and tribulations of two fat women who fall in love in a small town in the American West.[129] Stinson published two earlier texts, *Belly Songs: In Celebration of Fat Women* (1993) and *Fat Girl Dances with Rocks* (1994) that have her signature fat-positive descriptions but her later experiments with genre are particularly notable.[130] Stinson creates the seductive character of Martha Moody, the founder of the town and proprietor of a well-known shop in the town's centre to whom the narrator writes passionate stories that are published anonymously in the local newspaper. A secondary plot relates to how Martha is illegally supplying alcohol to the community that fosters a backlash from the local members of the temperance movement. In an evening of high emotions with the women in the temperance group, Martha's beloved shop is accidentally set alight, causing her to lose everything. At the end of the novel, the couple set out on the road, living a nomadic life free from the authority of husbands and fathers. Stinson's novel marks a shift towards stories of fat women that prioritise adventure and travel as a method of self-fulfillment,.

In the early 2000s, small and often feminist presses began publishing creative written forms with stronger size acceptance themes. Fat characters began to appear

[128] Cherie Bennett, *Life in the Fat Lane* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1998) and Kimberly Willis Holt, *When Zachary Beaver Came to Town* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2001). Frances Kuffel, *Passing for Thin: Losing Half My Weight and Finding My Self* (New York: Broadway Books, 2004); Brian Francis, *The Secret Fruit of Peter Paddington* (London and New York: Harper Perennial, 2005) and Ann Pai, *My Other Body: a memoir of love, fat, life, and death* (California: Sunspot Press, 2006).
[129] Susan Stinson, *Martha Moody: A Novel* (Midway, FL: Spinsters Ink, 1995).
[130] Susan Stinson, *Belly songs: In celebration of fat women* (Northampton, MA: Orogeny Press, 1993); Susan Stinson, *Fat Girl Dances with Rocks* (Midway, FL: Spinsters Ink, 1994).

more consistently in storylines about artistic development and friendships with size acceptance themes, including novels like Rebecca O'Connell*, Myrtle of Willendorf* (2000), Amanda Davis's *Wonder When You'll Miss Me* (2003), Patrick Sanchez's *The Way it is* (2003), Michelle Embree's *Manstealing for Fat Girls* (2005), Liza Palmer's *Conversations with the Fat Girl* (2005), Pat Lowery Collins's *The Fattening Hut* (2005).[131] A range of anthologies were also published on topics of gender and fatness, including Shelley Bovey's *Sizeable Reflections: Big Women Living Full Lives* (2000), Susan Koppelman's *The Strange History of Suzanne LaFleshe And Other Stories of Women and Fatness* (2003), and Donna Jarrell and Ira Sukrungruang's *What Are You Looking At?: An Anthology of Fat Fiction* (2003).[132] In this period, the size-positive publishing house Pearlsong Press, specialising in books that are "body-mind-spirit positive and fat friendly," was founded in 2003 by writer and psychologist Peggy Elam and published Frannie Zellman's *Fat Poets Speak: Voices of the Fat Poets' Society* (2009).[133]

Albeit with a lighter touch, mainstream presses move away from depictions of fat protagonists that hinge on compulsive behaviour and suffering. Novelists focus more on older women characters in popular romance stories, like British writer Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary* (1996), British author Jane Green's *Jemima J: A Novel About Ugly Ducklings and Swans* (2001) and Canadian author Elyse

[131] Rebecca O'Connell*, Myrtle of Willendorf* (Ashvill: Front Street, 2000); Amanda Davis, *Wonder When You'll Miss Me* (New York: William Morrow, 2003); Patrick Sanchez, *The Way it is* (New York: Kensington Books, 2003); Michelle Embree, *Manstealing for Fat Girls* (Berkeley: Soft Skull Press, 2005); Liza Palmer, *Conversations with the Fat Girl* (New York: 5 Spot, 2005); Pat Lowery Collins, *The Fattening Hut* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2005).
[132] Shelley Bovey's *Sizeable Reflections: Big Women Living Full Lives* (London: Women's Press, 2000), Susan Koppelman's *The Strange History of Suzanne LaFleshe And Other Stories of Women and Fatness* (New York: The Feminist Press 2003), Donna Jarrell and Ira Sukrungruang's *What Are You Looking At?: An Anthology of Fat Fiction* (Orlando and New York: Harvest, Harcourt, 2003).
[133] Frannie Zellman's *Fat Poets Speak: Voices of the Fat Poets' Society* (Nashville: Pearlsong Press, 2009).

Friedman's *Waking Beauty* (2004).[134] The "plus-size chick lit" genre took off with Fielding's novel with Bridget's constant monitoring of her weight but is fully realised in 2001 with Jennifer Weiner's bestseller *Good in Bed*.[135] Weiner tells the story of entertainment journalist Cannie reading an article by her ex-boyfriend Bruce called "Loving a Larger Woman". Bruce's comedic and condescending article details the unique plight of men who love larger women, which suggests Cannie has ended their relationship because she cannot love herself. Cannie is humiliated but spends a night with Bruce after his father dies that results in pregnancy. When Cannie's child is born prematurely and has to remain in hospital, she begins taking long walks around the city to assuage her worry that transforms her fat to muscle. Eventually Cannie is able to bring her daughter home, enters into a new relationship, and even begins writing, taking over the "Loving a Larger Woman" column from Bruce. Weiner's novel is shot through with the experience of living and loving as a fat woman, without weight loss being a prerequisite for happiness. Even though there is a bodily transformation, the emphasis is on muscle and strength as opposed to a slim physique.

A thematic thread becoming evident throughout the latter part of the second wave is travel, whether walking city streets like a flaneuse or flying across Europe.[136] Canadian writer Douglas Coupland's *Eleanor Rigby* (2004) frames the story of lonely, fat woman Liz Dunn with two trips to Europe that transform her closed-off existence – one that results in a pregnancy, and one that results in her regaining a

[134] Helen Fielding, *Bridget Jones's Diary* (London: Picador, 1996). Jennifer Weiner, *Good in Bed* (Washington, DC: Washington Square Press, 2001). Jane Green, *Jemima J: A Novel About Ugly Ducklings and Swans* (New York: Broadway Books, 2001) Elyse Friedman, *Waking Beauty* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2004).
[135] Jennifer Weiner, *Good in Bed* (Washington, DC: Washington Square Press, 2001).
[136] Another novel that touches on this theme is Christopher Nicholson, *The Fattest Man in America* (London: Constable, 2005).

sense of wonder after her son's death. A novel that best encapsulates the primacy of travel to this cluster of second wave novels is Stinson's *Venus of Chalk* (2004).[137]

Fallible "everymen" and multi-focal narration

Fictional representations of fatness that appear in the late 2000s conform to a third wave in this literary history that saw a rise in experimentation with form.[138] Popular and niche texts continue to proliferate as genre fiction, including a range of novels with a clear size acceptance message including, for example, Charlie Lovett's *The Program* (2008), Rebecca Fox and William Sherman's *Measure By Measure* (2009); Susan Vaught's *My Big Fat Manifesto* (2009) and Lorraine Duffy Merkl's *Fat Chick: A Novel* (2009).[139] Other forms of creative forms proliferate too, including memoirs such as Stephanie Klein's *Moose: A Memoir* (2008) and Jennifer Joyner's *Designated Fat Girl: A Memoir* (2010), as well as young adult fictions including Allen Zadoff's *Food, Girls, and Other Things I Can't Have* (2009) and Linda Ann Rentschler's *Fat Camp* (2010). [140]

In the late 2000s and early 2010s, more experimental literary fictions featuring fat characters begin to dominate bestseller lists and achieve awards, such as Junot

[137] Susan Stinson, *Venus of Chalk* (Ann Arbor, MI: Firebrand Books, 2004).
[138] Some early experimental fictions include Shelley Jackson, *The Melancholy of Anatomy: Stories* (New York: Random House, 2003); Marie Darrieussecq, *Pig Tales: A Novel of Lust and Transformation* (New York: Faber and Faber, 2003); Zadie Smith, *On Beauty* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2005); Gary Shteyngart, *Absurdistan* (New York: Random House, 2006); Blake Butler, *Ever* (New York: Calamari Press, 2009).
[139] Charlie Lovett, *The Program* (Nashville: Pearlsong Press, 2008); Rebecca Fox and William Sherman, *Measure By Measure* (Nashville: Pearlsong Press, 2009); Susan Vaught, *My Big Fat Manifesto* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2009); Lorraine Duffy Merkl, *Fat Chick, a novel* (London: Vineyard Press, 2009). Fantasy novels include Larry Niven and Steven Barnes, *The Moon Maze Game* (New York: Tor Science Fiction, 2011).
[140] Stephanie Klein, *Moose: A Memoir* (Illinois: William Morrow, 2008); Jennifer Joyner, *Designated Fat Girl: A Memoir* (Charleston: Skirt!, 2010); Frances Kuffel, *Eating Ice Cream with My Dog: A True Story of Food, Friendship, and Losing Weight... Again* (California: Berkeley Publishing Group, 2011). Allen Zadoff, *Food, Girls, and Other Things I Can't Have* (New York: Lerner Publishing 2009); Linda Ann Rentschler, *Fat Camp* (Los Gatos: Smashwords, Inc., 2010); Erin Lange, *Butter* (London: Faber and Faber, 2013); Rainbow Rowell, *Eleanor & Park* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2013).

Díaz's Pulitzer Prize winning novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007).[141] The meaning of the fat character expands beyond women's relationship with body and identity in a highly pressurised sexist society – although these ideas persist in literature in novels like Shauna Reid's *The Amazing Adventures of Dietgirl* (2010) and Stephanie McAfee's *Diary of a Mad Fat Girl* (2012).[142] In recent fiction, fat characters can be made to represent an overlooked quiet nobility and the potential for greatness. Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007) marks the beginning of the third wave in the story of Oscar de León, a fat second-generation Dominican American teenage boy growing up in New Jersey who deviates from the hypermasculine image of men in Dominican culture. Oscar's story, and that of his family history, is told by his sister's boyfriend Yunior, a macho womaniser. At the end of the novel Oscar is killed after falling in love with a woman who is also in a relationship with a police officer. Yunior finds in the death of this "fat sci-fi-reading nerd" a fable of heroic masculinity.[143]

In contemporary fiction, fat characters are being recuperated or framed as unlikely heroes for a modern America. Such figures are quietly transformative in their community, as in Elizabeth Strout's novel in stories *Olive Kitteridge* (2008) where a fat, retired schoolteacher is the focal point for her small-town community in Maine.[144] Strout plays with the marginality of the older and fat woman by placing Olive on the margins of most of the stories but as a significant character who is a catalyst for change; a foil for the crises of others, she is of central importance to the thirteen

[141] Junot Díaz, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2007).
[142] Shauna Reid, *The Amazing Adventures of Dietgirl* (London and New York: Random House, 2010); Jill Oliver, *Tannebaum Fat Suit* (Bloomington: Author House 2010); Michelle Cantrell, *Confessions of a Failed Anorexic* (Kansas: Cantrell Media Company, 2011); Stephanie McAfee, *Diary of a Mad Fat Girl* (New York: New American Library, 2012); Stephanie McAfee, *Happily Ever Madder: Misadventures of a Mad Fat Girl* (New York: New American Library, 2012).
[143] Ibid., 19.
[144] Elizabeth Strout, *Olive Kitteridge* (New York and London: Simon & Schuster, 2008).

interlinked short stories or chapters that form the novel. Strout details the lives and problems of the residents – from a musician haunted by a past romance to a former student of Olive's who has lost the will to live but Olive holds these stories together, and faces up to her own anger as it has affected a close family member, through her community.

In the 2010s the flawed fat 'everywoman' or 'everyman' is much more firmly situated in the domestic space and family unit – literally, in some novels, which focus on housebound fat men, such as Liz Moore's *Heft* (2012), which depicts a reclusive former professor who can no longer make it up to the second floor of his house, and Samuel D. Hunter's play *Whale* (2012), which focuses on an immobile father who spends the entire production in his chair.[145] Jami Attenberg's *The Middlesteins* (2011) is the first in a cluster of novels that hinge on the compulsive pathology of a fat character as the centre of a family crisis. The crisis in *The Middlesteins* is the overeating and looming medical problems of Edie Middlestein, and the ways in which her family members deal with her seemingly unrelenting journey towards death by consumption.[146] Edie finds love outside her family with Chinese restaurant owner Kenneth Song who resolves to feed her into good health. But, before he can do so, Edie dies. In a darkly humiliating image, she is reaching into her freezer for ice cream. Brutal descriptions of fat characters continue in the 2010s, as exemplified in Michael Kimball's semi-autobiographical novella *Big Ray* (2012).[147] Told in 500 vignettes, protagonist Daniel tries to make sense of his abusive father's life and the grief he feels for a father he both hated and loved. In brutally explicit detail about Ray's fat body looks, moves and smells because, for Daniel, his father's large and

[145] Samuel D. Hunter, *The Whale* (New York: Samuel French, Inc., 2012); Liz Moore *Heft* (New York: Windmill Random House, 2012).
[146] Jami Attenberg, *The Middlesteins* (London: Serpent's Tail, 2011)
[147] Michael Kimball, *Big Ray* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2012).

powerful body was entwined with abuse. In these two wildly different stories, fat characters are subjects of investigation by their family members. Their voices remain largely absent and their motives for eating to excess remain mysterious and therefore frightening.

Whereas fat characters in the first and second waves are defined through their first-person narration, fictions in the third wave tend to be narrated by a friend or family member of the fat character. Super-obese people are represented by narrators who fear their own capacity for letting themselves go if they do not remain vigilant of their own appetites and desires. Such narrators act as gatekeepers as if to protect their families against fat characters who are increasingly depicted as toxic. Lionel Shriver's novel *Big Brother* (2013), one of the more recent and potent examples of this pattern, focuses on protagonist Pandora Halfdanarson as she recalls the last few months of her brother Edison's life after he gained 200 pounds.[148] *Big Brother* is a story of Pandora's mourning and guilt following her brother's death, but it is also an illuminating example of how this latest development in fat explores one person's ability to make a change and the types of extreme behaviours people can address in life as in fantasy.

In this chapter I have outlined the history of fatness as both an activist and academic field, linking ideas of bodily transformation to key texts in North American activism, notably Shadow on a Tightrope (1983), as well as to the origins of an academic field of scholarship of fat studies, beginning with Eve Sedgwick and Michael Moon's writing on 'coming out as fat'. This history has also established the often overlooked significance of fiction criticism in relation to fat women's bodies to the development of fat studies as a field in the 2000s by Sharon Monteith and Patricia

[148] Lionel Shriver, *Big Brother* (Harper Collins, 2013).

Yaeger. Drawing on Monteith and Yaeger, I link bodily journey narratives to the ideas of fat women's bodies as loaded symbols of social and cultural meanings and fantasies. I contribute to the field of fat studies through an analysis of fictions of fatness by identifying three broad trends in representations of fat women in particular. The novels I have selected for this study are representative of the three waves in fictional representations and feature noteworthy representations of weight loss and size acceptance. The journeys in Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle*, Wally Lamb's *She's Come Undone*, Susan Stinson's *Venus of Chalk*, and Lionel Shriver's *Big Brother* illuminate the variety of ways in which writers have evoked, but also refused and complicated, the arc of a triumphant weight loss narrative.

Chapter Two

An Unruly Female *Bildungsroman*? Fat, Maturity and Knowledge in Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle*

Margaret Atwood's third published novel *Lady Oracle* (1976) begins with protagonist Joan Foster successfully faking her own death. Looking back over her life, she notes: "The trouble with me, I thought, was that I had experience all right, but I couldn't seem to learn from it".[1] This chapter examines Joan's journey to knowledge and maturity in *Lady Oracle*, analysing Margaret Atwood's engagement with the formula, ideas and underlying assumptions of the *Bildungsroman*. In particular, it examines Atwood's exploration of maturity as a social and literary construction and considers how Joan's alienation from conventional gender norms as a fat girl and her self-conscious performance of conventional femininity as an adult frustrates her journey to maturity and self-acceptance. *Lady Oracle* presents two interesting interventions into fatness, temporality and the grotesque. Drawing on the ideas of Kathryn Bond Stockton and Jack Halberstam who discuss normative time and "queer childhoods", I argue that Joan's retrospective narration of her childhood is an attempt to affirm her story of "rebirth" following weight loss by othering her fat child body as grotesque, sexually transgressive and prematurely aged.[2] I build on the idea of the "stunting" grotesque as outlined by Mary Russo to argue that Joan's opportunities to reflect and

[1] Margaret Atwood, *Lady Oracle* (London: Virago, 1982 [1976]), 280.
[2] Kathryn Bond Stockton, *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009); Jack Halberstam, *In A Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005).

learn are frustrated by her self-erasing "domestic" performance of heteronormativity and her investment in the heterosexual plots of gothic romances that keep her stuck in a cycle of repetition.[3] Developing the ideas of Rita Felski on the delayed development of protagonists in female *Bildungsromans*, this chapter also argues that Joan's delayed development is intertwined with her understanding that women of size are grotesque, and the ways in which she participates in this narrative.[4] By frustrating Joan's maturation, Atwood undermines the traditional logic of the *Bildungsroman*, which typically depicts the movement from innocence to self-knowledge, and creates a variant of the *Bildungsroman* that explores the intersection of gender, size, and histories and practices of self-loathing and self-denial.

Set in post-World War II Toronto, *Lady Oracle* focuses on Joan's coming of age story after she has faked her own death and fled to Italy. Joan's retrospective narration recalls her childhood when she first gains and then loses weight in an effort to assert herself against her domineering mother Frances. The death of Joan's loving Aunt Lou becomes the financial and emotional incentive to lose weight and leave home, which sees her transformation from a 240-pound adolescent to a more conventionally attractive young woman. In her newly-thin body, Joan travels and reinvents herself, beginning a secret career as a writer of costume gothic tales and playing different feminine roles with each lover she takes. When these relationships prove constraining, she projects herself and her lovers into a victim and villain dichotomy in order to justify her escape. Her unhappiness manifests itself in a period of automatic writing, which produces the "feminist" poem "Lady Oracle" from which the novel takes its title. The resulting fame leads to an increase in paranoia and even a

[3] Mary Russo, *The Female Grotesque* (New York: Routledge, 1994).
[4] Rita Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change* (Cambridge, Massachussetts: Harvard University Press, 1989).

blackmail attempt, and in response Joan escapes to Italy. In Italy, Joan embodies the two most prominent endings for female *Bildungsroman* heroines: she is legally dead but in reality, living in exile. It is during this period that she finally confronts and incorporates figures from her past that she has long denied: the Fat Lady that reoccurs in her daydreams, her mother and her former selves. The novel turns full circle when the mysterious blackmailer is revealed to be a reporter to whom she tells her story. *Lady Oracle* is worth revisiting for Atwood scholars as well as scholars of fat studies for the ways in which it first denaturalises gender and maturity in Joan's alienating fat childhood, and then questions the transformative potential of the self-knowledge that lies at the heart of the *Bildungsroman* form.

Atwood criticism has established *Lady Oracle*'s status as a "gothic parody" due to its satirizing of gothic genre conventions, evident in the novel's paranoid heroine and her villainous pursuers, its labyrinthine domestic spaces, and ghostly apparitions.[5] Out of such analyses have emerged close examinations of the female writer, stereotypes of womanhood from fairy tales and myth, and split female subjectivity. Yet the novel equally satirises the coming-of-age genre. Ellen McWilliams's *Margaret Atwood and the Female Bildungsroman* (2009) re-evaluates Atwood's contribution to this form, arguing that the novelist's early fictions up to and including *Lady Oracle* provide the "best example" of Atwood's "renegotiation" of the *Bildungsroman* and her challenge to the genre.[6] While the traditional *Bildungsroman* tracks the development of a cohesive identity for the protagonist, McWilliams argues that *Lady Oracle* is a "subversion or inversion" of this generic move, in its depiction of Joan's progressively "divided selfhood and unravelling subjectivity".[7] Building on

[5] Reingard Nischik, *Margaret Atwood: Works and Impact* (New York: Camden House, 2000), 147.
[6] Ellen McWilliams, *Margaret Atwood and the Female Bildungsroman* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009).
[7] Ibid., 75.

McWilliams, I approach the novel for its specific engagement with maturity as a social and literary construction.

The *Bildungsroman* has been defined as the "novel of development" or a "novel of maturation" and is best understood as a coming-of-age story. A *Bildungsroman* typically follows the story of a single protagonist as they resolve a conflicted desire to find a place in society and emerge as an authentic and autonomous individual. The protagonist's gesture both outwards to society and inwards to a sense of harmony in oneself is a reason the genre remains "the *most contradictory* of symbolic forms".[8] The genre has also historically been read as typically focused on masculine experiences of the world, and a body of criticism emerged since the 1970s to discover and define the female *Bildungsroman*, and its differences from the "traditional" form. Annis Pratt, Rita Felski, Esther Kleinbord Labovitz, Laura Sue Fuderer and Susan Fraiman are among those who have defined this critical body of literature, and from their works three overarching differences emerge between the journeys of male and female protagonists.[9] The female *Bildungsroman* features a "delayed" female youth that often begins in adulthood or extends into middle-age; venturing into the world awakens the heroine to the limitations imposed on her because of her gender; and the heroine's sense of awareness ends in marriage, death, estrangement from the rest of society, or, in novels published since the 1970s, more positive open-ended outcomes, such as the

[8] Franco Moretti, *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture* (London: Verso, 1987), 10 emphasis in the original.
[9] Annis Pratt, *Archetypal Patterns in Women's Fiction* (Bloomington: Indian University Press, 1981); Felski*, Beyond Feminist Aesthetics* (Harvard University Press, 1989); Susan Fraiman, *Unbecoming Women: British Women Writers and The Novel of Development* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

protagonist finding her place in a community of women.[10] I evaluate the ways in which *Lady Oracle* reflects and distorts these three key elements.

McWilliams places Atwood in a lineage of Canadian female *Bildungsromans* including Alice Munro's *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971) and Margaret Laurence's *The Diviners* (1974). She argues that Atwood, Munro and Laurence "find clarity in the Bildungsroman at a key moment in the history of the genre" which indicates a "sea change in Canadian women's writing" in the 1970s.[11] I also link Atwood's *Lady Oracle* to another cluster of fictions published around the same time. *Lady Oracle* is representative of stories about fat embodiment from primarily (but no means exclusively) the 1960s to the 1980s, such as Fay Weldon's 1967 novel *The Fat Woman's Joke* and Andre Dubus II's 1977 short story "The Fat Girl" that depict trials of identity, marriage and femininity.[12] These narratives frequently focus on a suburban wife's story as she negotiates feelings of invisibility alongside her mother's will as it is acted on and through the body. The stories speak to a cultural and literary moment when the mother-daughter relationship was at the center of explorations of women's experience, which dominated early depictions of fat and femininity in particular. Susie Orbach's and Nancy Chodorow's feminist psychoanalytic texts in 1978 are a moment of high cultural visibility for issues and understandings of fat, which explore weight as a result of oppressive societal norms of womanhood but also identify the tendency of mothers to insufficiently nurture female children to varying

[10] Felski, Esther Kleinbord Labovitz and Laura Sue Fuderer echo the view that literature reflects reality in the 1970s. Esther Kleinbord Labovitz in *The Myth of the Heroine: The Female Bildungsroman in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Peter Lang, 1988) argues that "this new genre [the female *Bildungsroman*] was made possible only when *Bildung* became a reality for women, in general, and for the fictional heroine, in particular", 6-7. Laura Sue Fuderer in *The Female Bildungsroman in English: An Annotated Bibliography of Criticism* (New York: MLA, 1990) maintains that "[d]iscussions of the female bildungsroman [sic] began to appear in the critical literature in the early 1970s, when critics recognised its rise as a reflection of the contemporary feminist movement", 2.
[11] McWilliams, *Margaret Atwood and the Female Bildungsroman* (Ashgate, 2009), 54.
[12] Fay Weldon, *The Fat Woman's Joke* (London: HarperCollins, 2003 [1967]); Andre Dubus, "The Fat Girl" in *Adultery and Other Choices* (Boston: David R. Godine Publisher, 1977).

degrees.[13] Chodorow in *The Reproduction of Mothering* argues that girls retain a preoedipal attachment to their mother longer than boys, and that some mothers inflict damage on their daughters through a process of neglect and smothering.[14] Although Chodorow refers to a psychological extreme, Orbach in *Fat is a Feminist Issue* identified the same tendency as common, arguing that "Both female and male babies experience their first love relationships with the mother, but early on the mother must withhold a certain degree of support and sustenance from her daughter, in order to teach her the ways of womanhood".[15] It is specifically this inconsistent nurturing that creates a dysfunctional relationship between mothers and daughters around food as a source of sustenance and comfort. So closely associated are the feminist theories and fictions of fatness in this period that Sarah Shieff asserts that *Lady Oracle* "put human flesh on the bones of the [feminist] nonfiction, animating the anguish that Orbach and others had only gestured toward".[16] While scholars like Shieff focus on how feeding and eating becomes a realm where mother-daughter tensions are played out, I am interested in how Atwood evokes Joan's maternal relationships in relation to mentorship, particularly how this contributes to a social education rather than psychological fixation about womanhood, fatness and social roles.

The focus on suburban wives in 1970s novels also engages with differences that divided size acceptance activists from second wave feminist politics. The fat suburban wife became a figure that fat activists evoked to explore conflicted relationships with femininity, desirability and hyper-visibility. In the anthology

[13] Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender.* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978); Susie Orbach, *Fat is a Feminist Issue* (New York and London: Paddington Press, 1978).
[14] Chodorow in *The Reproduction of Mothering*, 99-100.
[15] Orbach, *Fat is a Feminist Issue*, 40.
[16] Sarah Shieff, "Devouring Women: Corporeality and Autonomy in Recent Fiction by Women" in *Bodies out of Bounds: Fatness and Transgression* Kathleen LeBesco and Jana Evans Braziel (eds) (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 214.

Shadow on a Tightrope (1983), Elana Dykewomon argues that there was a lack of recognition in second-wave feminist circles of the intersectional problems of fat women, such as increased discrimination by employers, street harassment, and medical neglect. She notes, "the fat dykes she did meet were usually as isolated and frustrated as herself, their fat politics dismissed as bourgeois and indulgent".[17] Laurie Ann Lepoff's 1975 essay "Fat Politics" was also republished in *Shadow on a Tightrope* where she declared she felt "more solidarity with a fat suburban housewife than I do with my slender lesbian sisters".[18] It is apt, therefore, that the first close textual analysis begins with Joan, a fat child character who grows up into a suburban housewife afflicted with ambivalent and shameful feelings about her past. *Lady Oracle* draws into focus dramas of the body/self and femininity between mother and daughter, as well as the dangerous allure of the supposedly "normal" and romantic. Atwood establishes a key theme for this thesis as a whole: the significance of repetition and delayed journeys in depictions of fat characters and how journeys of maturation appear differently where gender and size intersect.

My analysis of Joan's road to maturity also produces a new approach to fat and gender in the text. Previous criticism of *Lady Oracle* has read Joan's fatness as an example of uncontained femininity; as Molly Hite writes: "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".[19] Such a reading was very much of its time and reads fat as celebratory, emancipatory, or offering a form of negative power for Joan. I am approaching the fat

[17] Elana Dykewomon, "Travelling Fat" in Lisa Schoenfielder and Barb Wieser (eds) *Shadow on a Tightrope: Writings by Women on Fat Oppression,* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1983), 150.
[18] Laurie Ann Lepoff. "Fat Politics". Lisa Schoenfielder and Barb Wieser (eds) *Shadow on a Tightrope: Writings by Women on Fat Oppression* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books), 205.
[19] Molly Hite, *The Other Side of the Story* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1989), 131-132.

female body as grotesque in its alienation from and then self-conscious, excessive performance of conventional feminine gendered norms and rituals. The grotesque body, popularised by Mikhail Bakhtin in *Rabelais and His World* (1965), is defined by openness, orifices and bodily functions that stand in stark contrast to the ordered "classical" body.[20] Grotesque bodies are associated with the lowly, disgusting, and embarrassing, and represent both a scene of degradation and renewal in the open body. The fat child and the hyper-performing, identity-swapping housewife are both manifestations of grotesque excess and unruliness that challenge contained, self-disciplining femininity. Atwood's engagement with grotesque representation produces interesting temporal disruptions in the novel in terms of Joan's development and the *Bildungsroman* form.

An analysis of maturity in *Lady Oracle* offers two new theoretical interventions into fictional fat representation. First, Joan is rendered "out of time" through her fatness in childhood, as immature and prematurely aged, and then reborn as new through weight loss: "it was like being born fully grown at the age of nineteen".[21] In *The Queer Child; or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (2009), Kathryn Bond Stockton's theory of "backwards birth" offers an illuminating lens through which to view Joan's "recovered youth" in adulthood.[22] While Stockton focuses on literary depictions of queer children, she also broadens her analysis to all children who have been culturally "queered by Freud" (or, more broadly, psychoanalysis) as not-yet-straight. Stockton argues that the "gay child" does not exist until a future "outing" of the adult, revealing a commonality of all children: the

[20] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World,* trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984 [1965]), 317-318.
[21] Atwood, *Lady Oracle*, 141.
[22] Kathryn Bond Stockton, *The Queer Child* (Duke University Press, 2009), 3.

child can only appear through a "backwards birth".[23] Until this point, she argues, the child's sexuality is denied, refused and ghosted until maturity and their queer childhood is created retrospectively: "The child is precisely who we are not and, in fact, never were. It is the act of adults looking back".[24] Atwood reverses this process, revealing how Joan's narration temporally displaces her child body as "out of time" and not-quite-girl to cast her child self as "other" and "grotesque" in order to distance her new life from her former fat existence. In doing so Atwood comments on the ways in which women learn to curb not only their present urges and instincts but rewrite their own transgressive pasts.

Joan's story arc also provides a new way of conceiving the grotesque in relation to fat bodies and temporality. I argue that Atwood depicts a self-conscious and theatrical performativity of gendered norms and rituals when Joan embodies a more conventional image of feminine desirability post-weight loss. Drawing on Mary Russo's theory of the female grotesque, I connect Joan's body to both of the "stunted" and "stunting" female grotesque performances that Russo outlines.[25] "Stunted" women are "the doubled, dwarfed, distorted (stunted) creatures of the sideshow which stand in as the representatives of a well-known cultural presentation of the female body as monstrous and lacking".[26] In contrast, the grotesque "stunting" woman is "a model of female exceptionalism" based in aerial performance that is both transgressive and celebrated for its display of physical skill.[27] Most theorisations of fatness and the grotesque have focused on the nuances of the fat woman as the "stunted" grotesque, but I connect Joan's gender performance post-weight loss to a

[23] Bond Stockton, *The Queer Child* (Duke University Press, 2009), 6.
[24] Ibid., 5-6.
[25] Russo, *The Female Grotesque* (Routledge, 1994), 22-23.
[26] Ibid., 22-23.
[27] Ibid., 22-23.

domestic form of "stunting" grotesque. Russo's "grotesque" exceptionalism is transformed into seemingly non-spectacular everyday acts of feminine and domestic performance around constraint, self-erasure and self-denial. Joan's mental, physical and psychological performance keeps her trapped in a cycle of repetition, frustrating her journey to maturity further. Atwood presents a challenge to conceptions of gender by playing with fat and conventional feminine presentation as equally performative, grotesque, and stilting.

The chapter is divided into two parts. The first considers Joan's "actual" or biological youth until age nineteen and examines Joan's displaced childhood and rebirth into normative femininity, establishing the importance of her mother Frances and Aunt Lou in this transformation. The second analyses Joan's journey to maturation according to the *Bildungsroman* form, which Felski describes as the "interior and exterior period of discovery and development".[28] It demonstrates how Joan's "stunting" domestic performances in her relationships and fictionalisation of her past frustrate her journey to development and reveal the competing forces of knowledge, desire and denial that lie at the heart of the novel. In conclusion, I argue that the ultimate coming together of Joan's selves suggests that *Lady Oracle* is a *Bildungsroman* that depicts an unruly journey to maturity through struggles with gender, size and a painful history of self-denial and erasure.

Joan's maturation in the first half of the novel is depicted as a process of "growing wings", or of transforming from caterpillar into butterfly. It is the process of re-inscribing distance between the fat child and the grown adult. Joan narrates her retrospective account of her childhood and adolescence through a lens of otherness. Atwood depicts Joan's experience as a birth, from fatness to normative femininity and

[28] Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics* (Harvard University Press, 1989), 138.

her maturation as one from premature aging to newfound youth. When reflecting on her childhood Joan notes that to her "all fat women look the same, they all look forty-two".[29] Joan's weight loss therefore involves both a gender and temporal realignment: "it was like being born fully grown at the age of nineteen".[30] The loss of fat represents a radical adjustment to the journey to maturation for this novel's heroine. In evoking two distinct social experiences of fat and normative femininity, Atwood features Joan's maturation as a loop back in time and a second or recovered youth.

While the hero's period of development takes place in adolescence, the female *Bildungsroman* frequently begins in middle age when the protagonist is often already married: "Marriage, as that mark of narrative closure which exemplifies the merging of individual and social interests, is now explicitly revealed not as the endpoint of female *Bildung*, but as its very antithesis".[31] Rachel Blau DuPlessis famously described this in her book of the same title as "writing beyond the ending" of the traditional *Bildungsroman* and romance narratives.[32] The female *Bildungsroman* thereby expands beyond the point when the heroine is married, "for up until this point of maturation the heroine has no sharp delineation of herself or her role, taking her identity from the man she marries, and wavering between self-narrowing and growth".[33] Female youth as Rita Felski identifies it "is located at quite different points within a female social biography".[34] Felski makes the point that youth and middle age are socially and culturally constructed categories that signify accessibility to certain experiences, rather than a purely biologically defined age. Narratives with male protagonists have defined and characterised adolescent experiences and 'coming-of-

[29] Atwood, *Lady Oracle*, 82.
[30] Ibid., 141.
[31] Felski, *Feminist Literature and Social Change* (Harvard University Press, 1989), 138.
[32] Rachel Blau DuPlessis, *Writing Beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth-Century Women Writers* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985).
[33] Labovitz, *The Myth of the Heroine* (Peter Lang, 1988), 194.
[34] Felski, *Feminist Literature and Social Change* (Harvard University Press, 1989), 138.

age' fictions. In contrast, middle age, a slippery and indeterminate term that can be roughly described as between 30 and 55, is traditionally when heroines go through "interior and exterior" rites of passage that are otherwise naturalised by masculinist rhetoric as universal in adolescence or young adulthood.

In *Lady Oracle* Atwood not only writes beyond the ending but she depicts the protagonist as re-writing her own beginning, starting with her fat childhood. Joan's self-conscious act of narration involves reflections such as, "I am reconstructing this from the point of view of an adult, an anxious, prudish adult like my mother".[35] Zeynep Zeren Atayurt draws on Paulo Freire's work on oppression to argue that in adulthood Joan adopts the language of her "oppressors", namely, her mother, to describe or reflect on her past self as "fat and ugly".[36] In Freire's words, "'the fear of freedom' which afflicts the oppressed may equally well lead [the oppressed] to desire the role of oppressor or bind them to the role of oppressed".[37] To extend Atayurt's analysis, it is also important to examine exactly how Joan incorporates an oppressive gaze, revealing what this means for her desire to assert a sense of normality in the present, and to distance herself from an alienating past. Joan's first-person narration renders her child body as not-quite-girl, or phrased differently: her female child body is not-quite-there. Joan displaces her childhood and child body temporally by depicting it as being out of sync. The femaleness of the fat girl child and her sexuality are ghosted, rendered spectral, willfully unseen until her fat childhood becomes one

[35] Atwood, *Lady Oracle*, 44.
[36] Zeynep Atayurt, *Excess and Embodiment in Contemporary Women's Writing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 125.
[37] Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed. Translated by Myra Bergman Ramos* (New York, London: Continnum International, 2000 [1968]), 46.

of Joan's fictions: like a gothic romance, it is a fairytale of the "giant caterpillar" becoming the beautiful butterfly.[38]

In *Lady Oracle* Joan is characterised by her perceived and imagined lack of self-control. J. Brookes Bouson has discussed the relationship between gender and self-discipline in *Lady Oracle*, arguing that Atwood depicts in Joan's characterisation from childhood to adulthood "the unregulated and undisciplined female body as a grotesque spectacle".[39] To focus Bouson's reflection even further, it is Joan's child body in particular is depicted as a grotesque spectacle that betrays her lack of restraint. Joan considers her former fat self as "a beluga whale" who "never opened her mouth except to put something into it".[40] As time goes on, she becomes conscious that others view her "obesity [as] an unfortunate handicap like a hump or a club foot".[41] However, Joan's narration of her childhood first highlights the ways in which her grotesque status is related to issues of sexual and emotional unboundedness as reflected through her fat and her tears. In the earliest of childhood experiences, she describes hoping to play a butterfly in the school play at age six but, after putting on the pink leotard and glittery butterfly wings, she deduces her mother's and schoolteacher's judgement: "What she [her ballet teacher] was seeing, what they were both seeing, was her gay, her artistic, her *spiritual* 'Butterfly Frolic' being reduced to something laughable and unseemly by the presence of a fat little girl".[42] The moment Joan is "promoted" to the role of mothball instead of butterfly is the moment she recognises her bodily difference in a distinctly negative framework.

[38] Atwood, *Lady Oracle*, 46.
[39] J. Brooks Bousan, *Brutal Choreographies: Oppositional Strategies and Narrative Design in the Novels of Margaret Atwood* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 1993), 69.
[40] Atwood, *Lady Oracle*, 84.
[41] Ibid., 69.
[42] Ibid., 46 emphasis in the original.

Atwood codes Joan's othering through the suggestion of sexuality. In the pink leotard and butterfly wings Joan reflects: "with my jiggly thighs and the bulges of fat where my breasts would later be and my plump upper arms and floppy waist, I must have looked obscene, senile almost, indecent; it must have been like watching a decaying stripper".[43] The fat on Joan's young frame locates pubescent sexual possibilities on Joan's pre-pubescent body where none should be. These bulges of fat create a disquieting shadow, making Joan's body appear "obscene" and "indecent" for both its current and potential future sexuality. As an adult, Joan recognises this herself: "No wonder I fell in love with the nineteenth century; back then, according to the dirty postcards of the time, flesh was a virtue".[44] These soft pornographic materials reveal to Joan the constructedness of her own grotesque status and how it is tied to her specific cultural and historical context.

Atwood depicts Joan's attempt to dance like a butterfly as the movements of a "decaying stripper", perverting the expectations of the assumed audience: if the ageing stripper fails in her attempt to appear "sexy", Joan fails in her attempt to achieve a pre-pubescent equivalent. She fails to appear demure, pretty and chaste. With a body that spills and ripples out of her clothes—uncontainable and unbounded—Joan unknowingly transgresses conceptions of childhood innocence. Victoria Boynton describes the association of Joan's fat child's body with both sexuality and innocence as a "paradox"—it "disgusts while it fascinates".[45] Joan's body signifies sexuality out of place: like the stripper, she transgresses cultural norms for age-appropriate significations of sexuality and for the public display and performance of a sexualized body. At opposing ends of the biological clock, Joan and

[43] Ibid., 46.
[44] Ibid., 46.
[45] Victoria Boynton, "The Sex-cited Body in Margaret Atwood" *SCL/ÉLC,* 27.2 (2002), 56.

the ageing stripper reference sexual signs that are not, or should not, be accessible to them. The child body and the aged body are typically sexually invisible: in Western cultures, children are expected to emerge as sexual beings only in puberty, while women beyond menopausal age are traditionally expected to subdue visual cues of active sexuality, womanliness and sexual availability (for instance, by dressing in muted and conservatively cut clothing).

As Joan reaches high school she continues to feel as if she stands outside of normative concepts of femininity and sexuality. For the conventionally feminine girls, the novel represents high school as a period of coy aversion to the wanted and unwanted attention of boys, as illustrated by Joan's friend Valerie when an unnamed boy tags along with the two girls on their walk home: "She wasn't interested—in her opinion, as I knew, he was a pill—but etiquette dictated that she not be too openly rude to him, as that might get her the reputation of being stuck-up".[46] The normatively thin girls are careful not to be too available to the boys they like or too dismissive of the boys they do not. However, unlike her sexually-desired and sexually-desiring friends, Joan notes how she and other fat girls in her school are excluded from these normative rituals and instead perform according to their own set of "characters". Atwood positions these limiting roles for fat girls on a spectrum of sexuality. Joan first recalls Monica, the masculine butch, who is "accepted by [the boys], more or less, but as another boy. They didn't seem to think of her as a woman at all".[47] Theresa, a sad and lonely girl, has the "traditional fat-girl reputation", according to Joan, that presupposes an apparent openness to any and all advances. Theresa is both abject and hypersexual in her supposed sexual availability: "no one knew whether or not the rumors were true, that she would do it under the right circumstances, but

[46] Atwood, *Lady Oracle*, 97-98.
[47] Ibid., 93.

everyone believed them".[48] The female adolescent bodies of Monica and Theresa are ghosted: Monica through masculine presentation and Theresa through the perception of an aggressive sexual maturity.

Meanwhile, Joan crafts an entirely different role for herself within a heteronormative adolescent culture. Playing the "kindly aunt" and "wisewoman", Joan is well-liked by the popular girls and becomes a giving and undemanding friend to classmates engaged in the typical courtship rituals.[49] While discussing their sexual experiences, her friends exclude Joan "out of respect, as one would exclude a nun or a saint"[50] and Joan finds herself ushered into a sexual role commonly usually ascribed to matronly older women who are believed to have moved beyond sexual desire: "Though immersed in flesh, I was regarded as being above its desires, which of course was not true".[51] Joan notes how her de-sexualisation, or assumed asexuality, is something to which she acquiesces through a lack of other available roles: "for the most part I suppressed my interest in sex as completely as I suppressed my interest in war films. There was no available role for me, so I ignored the whole thing as much as possible".[52] Joan's turning away from sex is a normalised and internalised exclusion like, she suggests, fat women and men in romance. So deep is her internalised difference that even the few crushes Joan develops are not on the same teen idols as her peers, as she quickly realises: "Although I pretended to, I didn't really join in my friends' collective passion for male singers".[53] Instead she develops crushes on figures on the margins of society and culture, like a depiction of the god

[48] Ibid., 94.
[49] Ibid., 93.
[50] Ibid., 97.
[51] Ibid., 94.
[52] Ibid., 96-97.
[53] Ibid., 97.

Mercury "that used to appear on the front of the Toronto telephone directory".[54] Influenced by the escapist romance films she watches with her Aunt, Joan's crushes are presented as fictional, cartoonish and quite literally more myth than man, a pattern of projection that follows Joan into adulthood with her lovers.

In comparison to the tentative courtships of the thin girls, the spectrum of teenage sexuality Atwood posits for fat girls ranges from the deviant hypersexuality of Theresa to the masculine, pseudo-homosocial bonding of Monica, and, finally, the asexual maturity of Joan. What is notable in the representation of available sex and gender roles for fat girls in *Lady Oracle* is a perceived absence of "girlhood" for the fat teen. Unlike their peers, Theresa, Monica and Joan are unable to gain access to the popular culture of girlhood—a culture of ritualised coyness, romantic idealism and a dedication to the feminine mystique—because in basic terms, Theresa and Monica give away too much, either in reported sexual contact or in giving up heterosexual feminine power for homosocial kinship. Joan attempts to find a middle ground, immersing herself in the culture of her peers, and stifling all sense of will and opinion in order to secure a safe space in this girl culture:

> I knew everything about my friends, their hopes, their preferences … But they guessed nothing about me; I was a sponge, I drank it all in but gave nothing out, despite the temptation to tell everything, all my hatred and jealousy, to reveal myself as the duplicitous monster I knew myself to be. I could just barely stand it.[55]

While initially it seems as if Joan has found a preferable role because her way avoids social condemnation to a greater extent than Monica or Theresa, Joan barters for social acceptance with repression and duplicity and that reinforces her feelings of grotesque monstrosity.

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[54] Ibid., 97.
[55] Ibid., 49.

Joan's adolescent alienation from a gendered rite of passage manifests itself as an anxiety about her future. Growing up in a suburban fifties home, Joan can only see uncertain paths and uncertain futures that fail to include romance and marriage, experiences that are framed as "at risk" from an early age. The institutions of the family and psychiatry construct fat and marriage as opposing experiences. Joan's memories of therapy boil down to her psychiatrist's statement: "Don't you want to get married?"[56] This is a ventriloquising of the voice of her mother: "who would think of marrying a mothball? A question my mother put to me often, later, in other forms".[57] Jack Halberstam's ideas of queer and normative time are helpful for understanding how Joan struggles to think outside of what Halberstam calls heteronormative logics: "Queer subcultures produce alternative temporalities by allowing their participants to believe that their futures can be imagined according to logics that lie outside of those paradigmatic markers of life experience—namely, birth, marriage, reproduction, and death".[58] The policing of her body by familial and non-familial authorities results in Joan accepting that these "paradigmatic markers of life experience" are out of bounds for her, yet her aspirational normativity prevents her from imagining new communities or considering other subcultures. Her place outside of heteronormative logics creates a "constantly diminishing future" with the "threat of no future hover[ing] overhead like a storm cloud".[59] In Joan's retrospective narration, these fears appear comedically large for a young child and teen but they nevertheless reveal how closely femininity and social mobility are entwined in cultural norms in the postwar North American setting.

[56] Ibid., 85.
[57] Ibid., 50.
[58] Jack Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place* (New York University Press, 2005), 2.
[59] Ibid., 2.

Joan's anxiety about her future can be seen most clearly in Atwood's recurring use of wings and flying imagery. Wings are a sign of graceful femininity and of ascension and flight, and are drawn upon in *Lady Oracle* as a symbol of upward mobility through femininity and domesticity. Atwood's deployment of winged imagery and flying in relation to women characters may be read according to Kathryn Bond Stockton's cultural analysis of coming of age as a "vertical movement upward (hence 'growing up') toward full stature, marriage, work, reproduction and the loss of childishness".[60] Stockton critiques the conception of childhood as a linear, horizontal progression towards adulthood and proposes that there are also ways of growing (or developing) that deviate from cultural expectations and norms: "There are ways of growing that are not growing up".[61] The queer child in particular refuses to grow up and to follow arborescent, vertical, even Oedipalised models of development (into normalcy, singularity, legibility), and instead grows "out," "around," or "across" sites of meaning. Joan's adolescence reflects a similar sideways movement because she is an outsider to the cultures of femininity and girlhood of her peers, and their relation to future success and happiness.

In *Lady Oracle* Atwood threads wings into several stages of childhood activity, such as the butterfly ballet and the Brownies' system of "flying up", in order to critique how the contained woman is valorised and progression on a path to normativity is rewarded. Praised for self-discipline and domestic skills, Brownies channel the girls' childlike competitiveness into the honing of domestic skillsets that naturalise a trajectory to homemaker in adulthood. In a chilling sing-song, the Brownies sing: "A Brownie does NOT give in to her*self*!"[62] Moreover, the rhetorical

[60] Bond Stockton, *The Queer Child* (Duke University Press, 2009), 4.
[61] Ibid., 11.
[62] Atwood, *Lady Oracle*, 54 emphasis in the original.

use of "wings" suggests that embracing disciplined feminine behaviours for young girls offers a promise of mobility and cultural capital. If a Brownie works hard and achieves her "Golden Wings" for "help[ing] others every day, especially those at home" she can then "fly up" to the Girl Guides.[63] Joan with her crying, clumsiness and lack of parental support fails to progress or "fly up," and, much like her experience of the butterfly in the school play, is punished for her unboundedness by being physically bound by the other girls in a ravine. The Brownies episode in *Lady Oracle* reframes a recurring theme in Atwood's work which is the position of women as complicit agents in their own oppression and in the oppression of others. Joan's unboundedness is first monitored by her mother and Miss Flegg, but by the time she is ten years old other children are monitoring her too.

Joan's internalisation of the association between femininity and (upward) mobility also manifests itself in the descriptions of adult women characters. All of the significant women characters are described by Atwood as winged creatures. The Brownie leaders are given the title Owls, Aunt Lou is described like a bee and, most significantly, Joan's mother Frances is described as several different predatory and mythical winged creatures. Frances is equated with a hawk, a "rotting albatross" and a three-headed mythical figure reminiscent of Medusa, who in some myths possesses wings as well as a deadly stare.[64] Therefore, while Joan develops a sensitive awareness to the many ways in which one can be a woman, that range from the wise and slightly naïve to the comforting and maternal, and finally to the terrifying and dangerous, she still struggles to see herself as anything other than a "giant caterpillar

[63] Ibid., 56.
[64] Ibid.,55 for reference to bee, 67 for hawk, 232 for rotting albatross, and 68 for Medusa.

… a white grub if you were really going to be accurate", arrested in her own development.[65]

The removal of Joan's wings before the butterfly play and her inability to "fly up" in the Brownies signal to Joan that she is on some other path with a future that cannot yet be seen by her. To combat her angst, Joan attempts to find alternative role models who present various paths of living and thriving. Joan jumps from image to image of fat ladies, including the figure of the opera singer and the Fat Lady in the Freak Show, and others she comes across in real life, such as spiritualist Leda Sprott: "Leda Sprott was quite fat… perhaps this was to be my future".[66] Leda Sprott, the opera singer and the Fat Lady, all allude to Joan's childhood dream of positive visibility. In childhood Joan visualises the Fat Lady as a dancer, figure skater, or a tightrope walker and imagines scenarios in which the Fat Lady triumphs against all odds. These visions are Joan's creative attempts to imagine an alternative possible future trajectory for herself.

The recurring daydreams of the Fat Lady in particular represent Joan's attempt to re-articulate her fears as triumphant feats of artistry. Joan's anxiety emerges in images of suspension and of floating in her daydreams (and later, falling, burial and diving), as opposed to images of ascension or "flying up". For instance, in Joan's daydream about the Fat Lady on the tightrope she refuses to grant the Fat Lady the wings she "longed to pin on her" and opts instead for a "diminutive pink umbrella" because "[e]ven in my fantasies I remained faithful to a few ground rules of reality".[67] Wings, an image of femininity and futurity, are made off limits to the Fat Lady, a projection of Joan herself. The absurd inclusion of the umbrella is grim comedy

[65] Ibid., 46.
[66] Ibid., 112.
[67] Ibid., 102.

because the Fat Lady would not be able to "float" to her safety; a fall would certainly mean death. Suspended high above a captivated audience on a wire, Joan attempts to create a triumphant narrative out of her own feelings of suspension and vicious cyclicality as she imagines the Fat Lady navigating the dangerous feat. Even though Joan takes the Fat Lady on a triumphant walk "past the lumbering enterprises of the West Coast, over the wheatlands of the prairies, walking high above the mines and smokestacks of Ontario", this escape is determined by an unseen figure, as indicated by the reference to a school bell: "the bell went and the period was over – this was the trick – she would step to safety on the other side".[68] At the end of the walk, the Fat Lady has nowhere to go, but to turn back on the rope or return to the Freak Show. She cannot deviate from the path Joan has set for her: "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".[69] Her feat therefore is merely the illusion of progress; it is a performance, at the end of which she will fall or return to perform the feat again.

The Fat Lady on the tightrope also brings together the two key forms of transgressive "stunted" and "stunting" female bodily performance that Mary Russo discusses in *The Female Grotesque*.[70] The Fat Lady aerialist resonates with both the "stunting" woman, who displays an awe-inspiring physical feat, and the "stunted" woman, who represents monstrosity and lack. The combination of these two forms of physical female irregularity, as Russo defines it, enables Joan to imagine the "stunted" fat lady engaging in a different type of "stunting" and controlling the spectacle in which she is involved. In this way, Atwood's *Lady Oracle* refuses, like

[68] Ibid., 103
[69] Ibid., 103.
[70] Russo, *The Female Grotesque* (Routledge, 1994), 22-23.

Russo notes of Angela Carter's large-bodied female aerialist Fevvers in *Nights at the Circus*, "to keep every body in its place" by combining the two forms of the female grotesque.[71] These two novels locate possibilities in "stunting" for "stunted" grotesque characters, exploring "stunts" as a mode of escape, even if only temporary and imagined, into a different form of unconventionality.

Joan's depiction also resonates beyond Russo's conception of physically "stunted" and theatrically "stunting" female bodies in relation to a temporal meaning of stunted – to prevent from growing or developing properly. Joan's position as a stunted female grotesque also contributes to her "stunted" development in social terms. For example, the Fat Lady's sideways or lateral movement along the wire is a metaphor that can be extended to Joan's tendency to embrace stasis, or move sideways in her life. Beginning with Joan's immersion in escapist movies, her adolescence is depicted as a series of lateral moves into other narratives and daydreams. In side-stepping reality Joan refuses to engage with or make decisions about the future. Refusing to move on into university education, Joan takes a series of "unskilled and not very pleasant" dead-end jobs for three weeks at a time.[72] Atwood draws a connection between these jobs and the Costume Gothic novels Joan writes later, as these are also a way to embrace repetition instead of progress because of their formulaic conventions. In this way, Atwood's depiction of Joan as a stunted figure goes beyond her appearance and into her actions. Joan's "stunted" progression is something she either actively or compulsively participates in, challenging Russo's definition of the "stunted" female grotesque type as "passive" (seen, perceived,

[71] Ibid., 70.
[72] Atwood *Lady Oracle*, 96.

received) in comparison to the "stunting" woman's "active" female bodily performance through physical aerial feats.[73]

Joan's lateral movements are protective and defensive acts in both childhood and adulthood. In childhood Joan embraces them as a survival strategy to avoid obliteration in the image of her "aggressive and ambitious" mother, as when she admits, "The war between myself and my mother was on in earnest; the disputed territory was my body".[74] Fiona Tolan discusses how Joan's mother represents what Orbach and Chodorow identified as an ambivalent form of motherhood that first neglects, and then smothers the female child.[75] Joan notes of her mother: "she seldom touched me … I could always recall what my mother looked like but not what she felt like".[76] Tolan argues that Joan's ambivalence towards her mother "manifests itself in her body" as a protest to, or resistance against, being made over in the same image.[77] While initially Joan's mother appears to want Joan to embody a more contained and feminine existence, Joan realises later that her mother has sabotaged this process to keep her close: "She went on baking sprees and left pies and cookies around the kitchen where they would tempt me, and it struck me that in a lesser way she had always done this".[78] The daughter's body becomes a semiotic zone wherein the mother asserts her authority and the daughter asserts her agency.

By embracing stasis or moving sideways, Joan expresses her agency by frustrating adults', specifically her mother's, agenda for her future. By adolescence Joan embodies negation by performing a "fashion show in reverse", embracing

[73] Russo, *Female Grotesque*, 22-23.
[74] Atwood *Lady Oracle*, 69.
[75] Tolan, *Margaret Atwood* (Rodopi, 2007), 78.
[76] Atwood *Lady Oracle*, 67.
[77] Tolan, *Margaret Atwood* (Rodopi, 2007), 78.
[78] Atwood *Lady Oracle*, 123.

brightly coloured ensembles in opposition to her mother.[79] However, embodying an antithetical position (anti-taste, anti-progress, anti-future) leaves Joan as the weaker part in a binary opposition. While she resists being made "over in her image, thin and beautiful", she becomes the dark mirror image of her mother: fat and grotesque.[80] By attempting to decentre her mother's influence, she paradoxically reinforces her as the original and primary audience of her downward spiral, wallowing in negative play: "I wasn't going to let myself be diminished, neutralized, by a navy-polka-dot sack".[81] The navy-polka-dot dress is reminiscent of her mother's navy-blue suit, referencing Joan's refusal to be turned into her mother's parody. To return to Russo's concept of the "stunted" grotesque, Atwood's depiction of Joan as an active participant in her grotesque display reveals Joan has a form of agency in constructing her bodily presentation. As such, *Lady Oracle* points to how even the "stunted" female grotesque form can be as much a form of female self-authorship as it is social rejection. Yet it is ambivalent in that it is tied to Joan claiming a position that is already abjected. Atwood undermines the radicalism of Joan's negative play as she "wants those things too": "I wanted to dance and be married to a handsome orchestra conductor".[82] In this way Atwood depicts Joan's lack of future as a form of defence against obliteration in the image of the mother but also a gesture that leaves her lost.

Atwood also suggests that Joan's mother is locked in a return to the daughter, who becomes her last remaining domestic project. Frances aspires to postwar conformity: "My mother didn't want her living room to be much different from everyone else's, or even very much better. She wanted them to be acceptable, the same as everyone else's, although her idea of everybody else changed as my father's

[79] Ibid., 71.
[80] Ibid., 88.
[81] Ibid., 88.
[82] Ibid., 84.

salary increased".[83] The aspirational in Frances's middle-class life is mirrored in her commitment to her husband's career as an anesthesiologist, yet Frances finds herself in a performance where she is inconsequential to her own successful mobility towards the "good life". Contrary to what her husband says, Frances believes entertaining his "important" colleagues at dinner will "help him with his career" and grows despondent when "she finally realized he'd been telling the truth … it didn't matter one iota to his career whether she had these people to dinner or not".[84] Devoid of any real impact on the trajectory of her husband's successes and, consequently, her own life, Frances's focus becomes more insular and turns inwards to the home. Frances becomes, as Susanne Becker describes, "sadly trapped within the ideal she embodies".[85] Frances becomes fixated on surfaces and images to distract herself from a deeper disappointment in domesticity. Once Frances achieves her refurbished "ultimate house" that looks much like "the show windows of Eaton's and Simpson's", she concentrates all her energy on "forcing [Joan] to reduce".[86] Joan becomes the final imperfect element that makes visible in her weight the deeper problems of the family and the social mores and gender roles that typify the "feminine mystique".

In Joan and Frances, Atwood depicts two crises of futurity. Frances is a figure in limbo, for whom domesticity has become a form of purgatory that she is unable to escape or from which she can progress. The unhappiness is both firmly based in 1950s domesticity and an ahistorical symbol of female sorrow. Becker argues that Joan's mother "recalls Atwood's 'Rapunzel Syndrome' – her (fairytale) image for a sad but typical female figure in Canadian Literature".[87] Frances certainly embodies a

[83] Ibid., 70.
[84] Ibid., 74.
[85] Susanne Becker, *Gothic Forms of Feminine Fictions* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), 163.
[86] Atwood, Lady Oracle, 71, 83.
[87] Becker, *Gothic Forms of Feminine Fictions* (Manchester University Press, 1999), 163.

figure both in and out of time when after her death she manifests behind Joan as an astral body (the spirit of the self as separated from the material body) at a spiritualist séance. In this vision, the figure is Frances at thirty years of age before Joan was born, immaculately presented in white gloves and navy-blue suit. Described by Leda Sprott as "very unhappy" and "very concerned" for Joan, it is significant that Frances's astral body is a vision of a past self. Frances's younger self is a manifestation of her mother's defeated hopes for herself and a present warning to Joan. Frances's astral body continues to return to Joan like a "transparent Kodak slide of herself taken in 1949" that becomes more distressing with each return. Later in the novel when her mother dies Joan sees her astral body again but this time "she was crying, soundlessly, horribly; mascara was running from her eyes in black tears".[88] So Atwood depicts Joan and her mother's struggle to negotiate a future within and outside of dominant cultural expectations of domesticity and marriage.

While Frances is Joan's biological mother, the novel includes another mother figure for Joan in Aunt Lou. In this way Atwood divides the maternal figure between Frances who withholds nourishment and punishes Joan, and Aunt Lou, who dispenses nourishment, pleasure and comfort. While Frances verbally and physically abuses Joan for eating, crying, and causing disruption, Aunt Lou comforts her with food.[89] Aunt Lou takes Joan to the cinema where she can escape from the present and indulge her imagination (and find a sanctioned space where she can cry). With a father who is little more than an absence, two mothers make up Joan's experience of nurturing in her childhood.

[88] Atwood, *Lady Oracle*, 173.
[89] Aunt Lou, Joan reflects, dispensed wise advice that "could have several meanings, when you thought hard about them", *Lady Oracle*, 88.

The tension between these mother-daughter relationships is central to *Lady Oracle* and integral to Joan's rebirth. Sarah Sceats draws parallels between Aunt Lou and the grandmother of protagonist Charis in Atwood's *The Robber Bride* (1993), for example, citing Aunt Lou as an "urban variation of … idiosyncratic nourishing". Both figures are "slightly witchy" and "positive if eccentric" mother-substitutes, who provide solace, psychic endorsement and "a robust dismissal of conventional rules of hygiene and behaviour".[90] Aunt Lou does offer a rare positive portrayal of a mother figure in Atwood's fiction and a way for Joan to value the messy, untidy characteristics that resist feminine containment. Aunt Lou wears clothes that highlight rather than hide her large figure: "bulky fur coats and heavy tweeds, which made her look even taller and fatter".[91] She is described as "befurred … Wisps escaped from her head, threads from her hem", in comparison to Frances whose hair is "carefully arranged" in "stiff immaculate curls".[92] In Aunt Lou, Atwood contests the de-sexualisation and harmlessness of substitute mother figures that have typically defined fictional representations of older fat women, most notably maternal figures in Charles Dickens's novels.[93] Instead, Aunt Lou is ambivalent and defies easy categorisation: she is both nurturing yet complicit in encouraging Joan's escapism, and motherly yet sexually transgressive in her affair with a married man. Aunt Lou represents an alternative way of embracing femininity, independence and rebelliousness but it fails to register as a viable model for Joan. Much like Aunt Lou's home after she dies, without Aunt Lou's "assurance and vitality" the lifestyle divorced from the person appears "unkempt" and "shabby": "Aunt Lou always made

[90] Sarah Sceats, *Food, Consumption and the Body in Contemporary Women Writing* (Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 2000), 14.
[91] Atwood, *Lady Oracle*, 14.
[92] Ibid., 81, 89.
[93] Sheelag Russel Brown, "Mothers and Molls: Re-imagining the Dickensian Maternal in Charles Palliser's *The Quincunx*" *Neo-Victorian Studies* 5 (2012).

you feel as though she had intended, even planned the disorder. Now it seemed like mere carelessness".[94] In this novel it is not a dreadful or ineffectual mother who prevents the daughter from imagining alternate ways of living in society; it is the daughter who struggles to deviate from the norm.

Joan's process of weight loss and the beginning of her journey to selfhood is entwined with her relationship with both mother figures in a reversal of time. It is Aunt Lou who begins Joan's rebirth, by providing both a financial and medical incentive. Joan's weight loss is initiated when she passes away and leaves Joan an inheritance that will only be forthcoming if she loses 100 pounds in weight. However, at the time of Aunt Lou's death Joan is injured in a work-place accident and interprets the accident as a sign or message from Aunt Lou (albeit an ambiguous one):

> I developed a raging fever, with delirium. One of the results of this was the notion that I'd been hit with the arrow at precisely the moment Aunt Lou died and that the shot had been guided by her departing spirit. She'd been letting me know, saying goodbye, in a rather eccentric manner, true – and she wouldn't have wanted me to get blood poisoning – but this was characteristic of her. I never quite got rid of this idea, although I knew it was farfetched.[95]

The financial incentive and the injury are interlinked through Joan's consequent weight loss. The arrow with which Joan is hit at work carries blood poisoning, causing Joan to lose the initial 30 pounds of the 100. While it may bring to mind Cupid's arrow, Atwood's use of this symbol is more significant for its association with time's arrow. Once hit, time begins figuratively to slow and reverse for Joan as she begins to shrink. Joan finds herself shrinking not only in weight but also in years from age 42 to 35 and finally, she is born again at 19. For example, with 18 pounds to go Joan remarks: "My face was that of a thirty-five-year-old housewife with four kids

[94] Ibid., 125.
[95] Ibid., 120.

and a wandering husband: I looked worn down".[96] If Aunt Lou is a "witchy" and "magical" figure, the arrow injury projects Lou into a fairy godmother casting a spell on the heroine that begins Joan's transformation from her drab existence to something like a princess.

Joan recalls her weight loss journey as a triumphant rebirth, borrowing imagery from the birthing process. It is a violently disorientating transformation in which she experiences "spectacular side effects" that include "blinding headaches, stomach cramps, accelerated heartbeat" and periods of bulimia.[97] Joan's "dwindling" is depicted as a plunge into the unconscious that brings forth "menacing faces" and "vivid geometrical shapes".[98] At the end of this experience Joan achieves "an alarming clarity of vision" and a reinvestment in a brighter future: "The world, which I'd seen for so long as a blur, with the huge but ill-defined figure of my mother blocking the foreground, came sharply into focus".[99] Bodily transformation grants Joan temporary release from the mother figure as both a premonition of her future and an avatar setting the course for her future. The association of rebirth with freedom from (becoming) the mother is emphasised throughout the novel and contributes to Joan's continuous need to reinvent her identity. Yet Atwood undercuts the triumphalism of Joan's rebirth through dangerous illnesses and unhealthy behaviour. While the blood poisoning launches Joan's weight loss, in order to continue losing weight Joan resorts to a concoction of diet pills – her mother's "miraculous remedies" that have been stowed away for years.[100] Joan perpetuates what she calls her "dwindling" with periods of starvation and disordered eating: a daily dose of "fat pills" and laxatives, a combination of Ayds, RyKrisp and black coffee.

[96] Ibid., 137.
[97] Ibid., 122.
[98] Ibid., 151.
[99] Ibid., 122.
[100] Ibid., 131.

Teresa Gibert, in a study of Atwood's use of metaphors of disease and illness, highlights how the novelist juxtaposes sickness with paradoxical concepts, such as plants, honesty, pregnancy and life-giving, to reinforce her critique of sex relations between men and women, in which women appear as patients and nurses. However, I would argue Atwood evokes metaphors of illness to denaturalise the "natural", particularly in relation to gender and motherhood. For instance, Gibert quotes Atwood's *The Edible Woman* (1969), which depicts the denaturalisation of motherhood in the form of Clara's pregnancy: "Maybe it isn't a baby at all but a kind of parasitic growth, like gall on trees, or elephantiasis of the naval, or a huge bunion…".[101] While *Lady Oracle* is reduced to footnotes in Gibert's analysis, the depiction of motherhood in Joan's rebirth is an apt correlative to Clara's pregnancy. In *Lady Oracle* Atwood plays on the image of mother's milk as Joan ingests the poisonous gifts of both her mothers (blood poisoning and diet pills) to emerge new. In contrast to *The Edible Woman*, it is not the child's parasitic encampment but the mother's "toxic" role in ushering the daughter into womanhood that denaturalises motherhood. Atwood implicates both mothers in the toxic process of "becoming woman". Binging on poison allows Joan to purge the childish fat that keeps her suspended in a ghostly childhood. In this final act of mothering both Frances and Aunt Lou usher Joan into the image she has rejected and desired in equal measure, that of the "average" heteronormative woman.[102]

Joan's rebirth and weight loss is described in terms of a complete erasure of her former body: "Suddenly I was down to the required weight, and I was face to face

[101] Teresa Gibert, "Metaphors of Health, Illness and Disease in Margaret Atwood's Fiction" in Isabelle Lange and Zoë Norridge (eds) *Illness, Bodies and Contexts Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (Oxford: Inter-Disciplinary Press, 2010), 123-134.
[102] Atwood, *Lady Oracle,* 144.

with the rest of my life. I was now a different person".[103] Becoming a "new person", Joan's transformation fixes the fat child as other from the adult self, allowing her fat self to be rejected as her past. Stockton argues that typically in queer coming-out narratives the memory of the child undergoes a retrospective rewriting through the act of coming out: "In one's teens or twenties whenever (parental) plans for one's straight destination have died, the destination 'homosexual child', or even 'gay kid', may finally, retrospectively be applied".[104] When Joan and her mother's will for her conventional appearance is achieved, a (hetero)normative future can be imagined. Atwood plays with the concept of ghosting the fat child, like Stockton's queer child, through Joan's act of retrospective narration that rewrites the child as different to her peers but also to separate the child from her new, normative self. *Lady Oracle* depicts a conservative reversal of Stockton's queer ghosting to depict Joan's fracturing identity and disassociation.

If Joan's childhood and adolescence are depicted as a journey during which Joan is growing her wings, her period of female youth in the context of the *Bildungsroman*'s literary conventions only begins in earnest when Joan departs the childhood home. Felski describes youth as the "period of interior and exterior discovery and development" wherein the protagonist has key defining experiences that include trials of love and romance, shedding one's negative feelings and ideologies, a period of informal education and emerging careers, and a burgeoning awareness of gender inequalities.[105] The following part of this chapter engages with McWilliams's claim that when Joan is "forced to adjust to life without the body that served as a protective barrier to the world but also denied her access to the coming-of-

[103] Ibid., 144.
[104] Bond Stockton, *The Queer Child* (Duke University Press, 2009), 6-7.
[105] Felski, *Feminist Literature and Social Change* (Harvard University Press, 1989), 138.

age rituals" she "compensates (and even perhaps overcompensates) for this loss, or rather denial, by inventing her own alternative, and ultimately more flamboyant and exciting, Bildungsroman".[106] I argue that in Joan's exaggerated *Bildungsroman* Atwood repeats, in different ways, the first section of her childhood by transferring the nurturer and educator role from mother to partner, and transforming her grotesque status from stunted to "stunting" more overtly. These formulaic repetitions retard Joan's maturity rather than advancing it, and thereby undermine the defining logic of the *Bildungsroman* as a journey from youth to maturity, innocence to knowledge, and lack of identity to a coherent identity.

When Joan embodies a more conventional desirable feminine appearance, her status as a grotesque figure, using the definitions of Russo, is transmuted from a stunted female grotesque to a 'stunting' woman in a much more identifiable way. Joan embraces her dream of embodying the stunt woman as created in the image of the tightrope walker, with several crucial differences. Atwood explores the "stunting" woman not as the "philobat" aerialist performer but as the homemaker, the wife, and the mistress.[107] Joan exhibits feats of physical skill and performance in her masterful escapes from each relationship and constraining domestic arrangement. In this way, Joan's "flying up" through normative femininity and romantic relationships become temporary "stunts" like the aerialist's "rises and falls", as she performs up to the expectations and desires of the men she is involved with.[108] However, Joan's characterisation as a "stunting" romantic keeps her in a cycle of repetition, disrupting

[106] McWilliams, *Margaret Atwood and the Female Bildungsroman* (Ashgate, 2009), 82.
[107] Russo, *The Female Grotesque*, 22-23.
[108] Ibid,. 22-23.

her "period of interior and exterior discovery and development".[109] Performing up to conventional gender roles further stunts, rather than advances, Joan's development.

Joan's "learning" femininity and "performing" obedient wifedom adds a parodies the idea of marriage as mentorship and frustrates the notion that overcoming romantic idealisation is key to women characters' self-development. This domestic theatricality and performativity critiques women's social roles and gender as a construct. "Stunting" gender performances in *Lady Oracle* present a unique dramatisation of Judith Butler's theory of performativity, that theorises gender as a "reiteration" of actions to the extent that they appear natural: "Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being".[110] Joan's past as a fat girl has left her isolated from the fullest experience of the feminised "stylization of the body", reflecting what fat studies critics have noted about how gender is experienced and reiterated differently for fat women. Sociologist Natalie Boero in *Killer Fat: Media, Medicine, and Morals in the American "Obesity" Epidemic* (2012) argues that "[n]ot unlike transsexuals learning the appropriate doing of gender as adults, fat people, particularly women, have often been excluded from normative patterns of gendered behavior, interaction, and embodiment".[111] Jeannine Gailey and Samantha Murray have similarly argued that fat subjects, and particularly fat women, often find themselves excluded from the practice of gender. They have separately observed that fat women do not find the "doing" of gender as accessible as slim women. This new self-conscious experience of gender, due to Joan's experiences

[109] Felski, *Feminist Literature and Social Change* (Harvard University Press, 1989), 138.
[110] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (*New York: Routledge, 1990), 25.
[111] Natalie Boero in *Killer Fat: Media, Medicine, and Morals in the American "Obesity" Epidemic* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2012), 110. See Samantha Murray, *The 'Fat' Female Body* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008) and Jeannine A. Gailey "Fat Shame to Fat Pride: Fat Women's Sexual and Dating Experiences" *Fat Studies Journal*, 1.1 (2012), 114-127.

as a fat woman, distinctly shape and disrupt her *Bildungsroman*. Romance, marriage and domesticity is not part of a slow, delayed but nevertheless consistent path to self-development but is instead a direct disruption to self-growth and, in many instances, a self-conscious "stunt" that keeps her development in stasis.

Joan's rebirth into normative femininity becomes a replay and return to a form of childlike innocence, where she does not know social rules or norms. It is only when she travels to England independently that she finds she is positively visible as a sexual and social being for the first time:

> It was on these bus trips that I first discovered there was something missing in me. This lack came from having been fat; it was like being without a sense of pain, and pain and fear are protective, up to a point. I'd never developed the usual female fears: fear of intruders, fear of the dark, fear of gasping noises over the phone, fear of bus stops and slowing cars, fear of anyone or anything outside whatever magic circle defines safety. I wasn't whistled at or pinched on elevators, I was never followed down lonely streets.[112]

Weight loss for Joan reflects a heteronormative alignment that involves what Boero has summarised as "relearning heterosexuality, consuming femininity, and becoming visible".[113] Following her weight loss Joan's experience of "doing" gender is put in sharp relief. While the ghosting of the fat female body is a painful and discriminatory process, Joan discovers retrospectively that this social invisibility resists another form of oppression, that of heteronormative surveillance.

Joan's experience of patriarchal constraints is typical of the female *Bildungsroman*. Annis Pratt defines this distinction as the "growing-up-grotesque archetype":

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[112] Atwood, *Lady Oracle,* 139-140.
[113] Natalie Boero in *Killer Fat* (Rutgers University Press, 2012), 110.

> [t]he vitality and hopefulness characterizing the adolescent hero's attitude toward her future here meet and conflict with expectations and dictates of the surrounding society. Every element of her desired world – freedom to come and go, allegiance to nature, meaningful work, exercise of the intellect, and use of her own erotic capabilities – inevitably clashes with patriarchal norms.[114]

Although Joan now fits in with gender norms, she still finds that she is transgressive, or grotesque, either way. Joan was grotesque as a fat child who exhibited "ghostly" evidence of premature sexuality, and now she is "grotesque" because as a "normal" woman she has wishes for freedoms that clash with patriarchal control. Joan's first conflict materialises in public space. As a thin woman, Joan has to learn a new set of unwritten rules and discovers that there are certain streets and certain times of the day that she has to avoid in order to protect herself in her new visibility:

> … when I shrank to normal size I had none of these fears, and I had to develop them artificially. I had to keep reminding myself: Don't go there alone. Don't go out at night. Eyes front. Don't look, even if it interests you. Don't stop.[115]

The novel positions Joan as having to "fake" awareness of what is safe and dangerous because in her adolescence it was neither necessary nor learned in the spatial navigation of her neighbourhood and world. Atwood creates a protagonist who is first alienated from conventional feminine and beauty norms to underscore the performative nature of gender for all.

Following Joan's weight loss, she learns new social rules around sex and the social roles available to her through her romantic relationships, which take on a toxic and controlling educational dynamic reminiscent of her relationship with her mother. In Joan's first relationship with Paul, a Polish Count, he offers Joan a place to stay

[114] Pratt, *Archetypal Patterns in Women's Fiction* (Indian University Press, 1981), 29, 67.
[115] Atwood, *Lady Oracle,* 140.

and it is only when Paul enters her bedroom that she realises she has unwittingly misread the situation: "He understood that he was getting into bed with me, and he understood that I understood this also".[116] Joan is newly aware that her lack of understanding seems "implausible": "Innocence has its hazards, and in my case one of them was that the Polish Count couldn't conceive of anyone being as simpleminded as I was".[117] Even though Joan has begun a new life, she still finds herself living up to the roles created for her by others. Reminiscent of having to play a mothball in her early childhood, Joan sleeps in the library next to the Count's popular romances, suggesting that she, too, has become one of the Count's other created characters as he projects onto her the category of "mistress".

Labovitz claims that in male *Bildungsromans* the hero is guided by a mentor, which the female protagonist rarely acquires, or only acquires in minor form through relationships with her partner.[118] Relationships come to form the basis of female development, even as the protagonist eventually needs to leave them to continue self-growth. In *Lady Oracle* Joan's partners become 'mentors' who help Joan on her journey of "interior and exterior discovery and development" by contributing to her socialisation to a different experience of gender as a thin person. Joan's romantic relationships reflect the same tensions around education and restriction that defined her first 'mentor' relationship with her mother, who also taught her about the roles she could or could not expect to occupy. To return to Orbach, Joan's relationships replicate a pattern of withdrawal and overbearing closeness that women experience with their mothers in order to prepare them for the world as a woman.[119] For example, her romance with the Count recycles elements of Joan's relationship with her mother

[116] Ibid.,161.
[117] Ibid.,161.
[118] Labovitz, *The Myth of the Heroine* (Peter Lang, 1988), 194.
[119] Orbach in *Fat is a Feminist Issue*, 40.

by alternating between nurturing and educational, with the Count mentoring her on popular romance writing, as well as smothering and demanding, with the Count resenting and suspecting her newfound independence through writing. The Count, like her mother, gives Joan the tools to nourish herself then feels threatened by its power. In a satirical image, Joan notices Paul hiding behind walls and doorways as she researches costume jewellery on Portobello Road. Paul's jealousy of Joan's interest in self-fashioning recalls the conflict she experiences with her mother over her body and clothes. In drawing a parallel between her new life and her old life, Atwood signifies how the policing of Joan's body is a consistent part of her socialisation and 'mentorship'.

The transferal of the social 'mentor' role from mother to partner could be read in psychoanalytical terms as a sublimation of inconsistent nurturing, and has been read by Sarah Shieff as a sublimation of Joan's oral fixation from food into words. Shieff reads the shift from oral fixation and eating to words and writing as a positive and healing development for Joan.[120] However, this positions Joan's relationship from eating to writing as a progressive, linear, healing development for Joan and fails to account for how Joan's rebirth thrusts her into another set of circumstances, challenges and performances. Moreover, this interpretation misses how Joan's romantic relationships are not only or even primarily about nurturing and satisfaction (internal, psychosexual) but about embodying an image of conventional femininity and domesticity (external, social) to satisfy her own, and her mother's, needs. While external and social performances could be read as representations of internal and psychosexual desire for nurturing, Joan's hyperbolic, erratic identity play suggests Atwood is concerned with surfaces and performances around gender specifically. For

[120] Shieff, "Devouring Women" in *Bodies out of Bounds* LeBesco and Braziel (eds) (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 225-226.

example, in each romance, Joan "tak[es] her identity from the man she marries" or is with and is cast and casts herself in the roles of her partners' desires, becoming a distorted "mirror image" of them, like she did with her mother.[121] While the female *Bildungsroman* usually begins with the heroine leaving a marriage that she finds constraining, Joan continually re-enters the constraining domestic sphere to create an idealised nurturing relationship but also to embody an idealised image of it that she has internalised in childhood.

Joan's wish for an idealised image of romance and nurturing requires both a physical and biographical rebirth that is based on embodying the interests and desires of her partners, while simplifying her own life. Joan's romantic relationships reveal an enjoyment in embodying the fantasies and roles she had been excluded from in childhood. The rewriting of her past defines the central romantic relationship of the novel between Joan and her husband Arthur, who is an intellectual that Joan falls for just as Paul begins to exhibit possessive behaviours. Mirroring her relationship with Paul, Joan initially romanticises Arthur as a "melancholy fighter for almost-lost causes, idealistic and doomed, sort of like Lord Byron", which resonates with the projection of her mother as an immaculate but sad and tragic figure.[122] With Arthur, Joan finds herself able to mould herself into an image that she thinks he will like in a way she never could with her mother, feigning an interest in social justice issues and impressing him with her knowledge of the Palestinian conflict that she vaguely remembers from school. She rewrites her personal history, recreating an adolescence that erases her fat childhood and therefore removes the problem that is at the heart of her social alienation. She creates an image of her childhood that she and, in theory, her mother would have wanted: she claims to have been a cheerleader and a prom

[121] Labovitz, *The Myth of the Heroine* (Peter Lang, 1988), 194.
[122] Atwood, *Lady Oracle,* 178.

Queen, and adds fictional romantic relationships with basketball players and sailing instructors. Her new biography is an attempt to expunge and bury her dysfunctional and grotesque past while pursuing a new nurturing relationship and conventional future, which is solidified when she literally erases her mother, telling Arthur that she died of the rare disease lupus. It also reveals an enjoyment in being able to successfully perform the role of the 'butterfly' that had been unconvincing in her childhood.

Joan's investment in fantasy, in both her relationships and as a writer, is a way to escape the same frustrated bitterness as her mother felt. Frances found no idyllic married bliss but rather that "marriage and death go hand in hand".[123] This is exacerbated when her mother dies when she is in England with Arthur. Rather than approach this loss as a moment of reflection, Joan projects a gothic logic onto her mother's life. She dies after a fall downstairs, which Joan suspects could have been suicide or at her most paranoid, murder at the hands of her father. The gothic plot delays what Felski identifies as "the difficult and painful … necessary steps towards maturation" that may include recognising the "deceptive myth of romance, the ideological fiction of idyllic married bliss".[124] In Frances's story and her own, she substitutes ordinary tales of women's suburban unhappiness with highly dramatised accounts of male passion and violence. Such escapist deflections leave the conditions of Joan's life unresolved, and most importantly protect the idea of a possible "happy ending".

Joan's refusal to confront the past and submergence into romance frustrates her journey to maturity. The classical (i.e. male, European) *Bildungsroman* is, as

[123] Janis L. Pallister*, The Art and Genius of Anne Hébert: Essays on Her Works, Night and the Day Are One* (London: Associated University Presses, 2001), 325.
[124] Felski, *Feminist Literature and Social Change* (Harvard University Press, 1989), 135-136.

Franco Moretti asserts, a forward-looking and future-oriented model. He suggests that looking towards the past in the classical *Bildungsroman* indicates a "refusal to see the future still 'open' which is an indication of maturity".[125] However, critics of female and multi-ethnic forms of the *Bildungsroman*, like Giovanna Summerfield and Lisa Downward, suggest looking backward does not indicate "a realization of a closed future" but rather "a crucial step in moving forward, in opening up to what the future has to offer".[126] Stella Bolaki goes further to argue that multi-ethnic texts "look backward in order to move forward" and that they are often doing the important work of "acknowledging the debt to the past, however traumatic".[127] In my reading of *Lady Oracle* Atwood depicts Joan's embodiment of conventional femininity and domesticity, images Joan has internalised as symbols of progression and futurity, as keeping her stuck in stasis and repetition. Atwood plays with images of progression and regression complicating these linear conceptions of development. The romantic plot is positioned interestingly in relation to forwards and backwards looking readings: it is both a psychosexual return to Joan's mother-daughter issues and her need for comfort and nurturing, as well as what queer theorists Stockton and Halberstam might identify as a fantasy of futurity and transformation around heteronormativity.

If Joan invests her partners with her hopes of the future and reconciling her maternal and childhood issues, she deflects her unwanted past onto her fat child self who represents both the worst of her mother and herself. The fat self is depicted as grotesque and rejected in order to more accurately fulfil the fantasy of progression, futurity and happiness. When Arthur spies a picture of Joan and Aunt Lou, he asks if

[125] Moretti, *The Bildungsroman in European Culture* (Verso, 1987), 68.
[126] Lisa Downward and Giovanna Summerfield, *New Perspectives on the European Bildungsroman* (London: Continnum, 2010), 107.
[127] Bolaki, *Unsettling the Bildungsroman* (Rodopi, 2011), 22.

Joan's fat teen self is her mother. In response she casts this former self into the fictional role of "Aunt Deidre" who she calls a "bitch".[128] Joan creates an "entire spurious past" via "this shadow on a piece of paper, this woman of no discernible age who stood squinting at the camera" with a face "puffed and empty as a mongoloid idiot's".[129] Joan displaces her prejudices onto her past self, and instead of losing her feelings of self-hatred they grow. She reproaches her adolescent self for navel-gazing while tragedies were happening in the world and refers to her past self as a "fat mongoloid idiot", "a defective", and a "throwback".[130] Joan hates her fat self for revealing what she really continues to be – a product of her mother's creation, stuck in the same loop. She projects blame onto herself, mixing her former self and her mother together: "She was always trying to tell me how to run my life".[131] In an ultimate and symbolic act of violence, Joan casts her adolescent self as a repository of everything she no longer wants to be -- the perpetual unhappy listener, as a maiden Aunt and "telephone operator".

In Joan's post-weight loss life, her grotesque performance of self-erasure and self-destruction as a daughter is transferred into her new role as a wife. Whereas previously she created a parody of herself to gain a form of negative power with her mother, she now self-parodies to gain a negative power in her marriage. The kitchen and food continue to be the stage where this negative performance of the grotesque, power relations and humiliation take place. Whereas Russo identities acts of aerial performances as "stunting" grotesque, Atwood reframes Joan's "flying up" into domestic normativity as an arena of theatrical physical performance that is distinctly exaggerated, staged and self-denigrating. She cultivates a repertoire of flaws, such as

[128] Atwood *Lady Oracle*, 91.
[129] Ibid., 91.
[130] Ibid., 180, 149.
[131] Ibid., 91.

being a bad cook, to please Arthur who both chastises and is amused by her domestic failures, with each meal more ridiculously awful than the former. Atwood does not depict the performance of ideal wifehood as one of flawless perfection, but to be flawed in ways that are undemanding and charming. Joan's grotesque domestic performance is one of disappearance as well as appearance. Discussing how most wives she knows are unsatisfied in their marriages because they expect their husbands to "understand them", Joan says her marriage sustains itself through Arthur's commitment to not understanding her: "Arthur's tastes were Spartan, and my early life and innermost self would have appalled him … I think he suspected this; he certainly headed off my few tentative attempts at self-revelation".[132] This serves to keep her true complexity at bay, and not a problem Arthur is obliged to help with. For example, when her unresolved past begins to haunt Joan in nightmares, Arthur reacts incredulously and dismissively: "Surely nothing that terrible had ever happened to me, I was a normal girl with all kinds of advantages, I was beautiful and intelligent, why didn't I make something of myself?".[133] Joan's grotesque domestic performance is intertwined with sustaining a myth of simplicity around women's lives, and Arthur's lack of interest in delving into the realities of (fat) womanhood.

Joan's grotesque domesticity leaves her similarly alienated from performances of femininity and desirability as she was in childhood. While in childhood her mother and teachers monitor and police her appearance, in adulthood her appearance and desires are monitored by Arthur. Arthur appropriates a discourse of feminist ideas and theory to curtail Joan's appearance and self-expression when she is looking at a form-fitting dress: "Later, when he took up Women's Liberation for flagellation purposes, he tried to tell me I shouldn't want to have clothes like that, I was playing into the

[132] Ibid., 234.
[133] Ibid., 233.

hands of the exploiters".[134] Arthur finds Joan's revealing clothes simultaneously insulting and arousing, replicating an ambivalence and desire for this performance of femininity that she also feels. She imagines Arthur's feminist critique of her fat past: "How much better for me if I'd been accepted for what I was and had learned to accept myself, too. Very true, very right, very pious. But it's still not so simple. I wanted those things, that fluffy skirt, that glittering tiara. I liked them".[135] Atwood points to the insufficiency of theory to articulate the messy, contradictory realities of women's lives and to account for the role of desire, especially for women and girls who may have found themselves excluded from such practices. *Lady Oracle* reflects the nuances of fat feminist activism of the time that was drawing out the complications of an evolving feminist discourse that did not take into account the intersectional oppressions around womanhood and fatness. For Joan, rejecting a conventional femininity rings as a hollow personal and political act when she was first alienated from this social performance in childhood and adolescence. To consider this in relation to Judith Butler's gender performativity thesis, Joan finds it harder to "undo" gender with any politicised force because she has struggled to embody and signify conventional gender presentation in the past.

Through domesticity, Joan finds herself metaphorically transforming back into a "stunted" grotesque figure. While Arthur praises Joan's intellect and laments the potential he feels she is wasting, he continuously reinforces Joan as a comforting vessel into which to pour and project his childhood and mother issues: "To all these monstrosities and injustices I listened faithfully, partly out of a hope that I would gradually come to understand him, but mostly from habit".[136] Joan frequently

[134] Ibid., 20.
[135] Ibid., 108.
[136] Ibid., 39.

describes her relation to Arthur in terms of comforting but inanimate objects. She describes Arthur embracing her from behind like a "teddy bear" (drawing a parallel with the "mothball" performance in her childhood ballet where she was made to wear a teddy-bear costume); clinging onto her in bed like a "big rubber raft"; and finally treating her like a "nourishing blob" during his depressive cycles. With Arthur she finds herself returning to her adolescent role as a good listener who is "reassuring, noncommittal, sympathetic as a pillow".[137] Joan cultivates listening as her defining attribute but it is also a position that she feels is expected of her by Arthur and she is unable to resist, finding herself shunted back to the same position as in childhood.

The grotesque body in both "stunted" and "stunting" versions is defined by a powerless position as a listener. Joan struggles to interpret the histories of others, like Arthur, and struggles to find a listener for her own history over the course of the novel: "What he didn't know was that behind my compassionate smile was a set of tightly clenched teeth, and behind that a legion of voices, crying, *What about me? What about my own pain? When is it my turn?*"[138]The suggestion that Joan is occupying a similar listener role as in childhood, taken to a different extreme, can be found in Joan's book length poem produced under self-induced hypnosis. "Lady Oracle" is a poem that Joan authors almost unconsciously, which speaks to the difficulty in accessing and making sense of her own voice. Sarah Shieff argues that writing is a mode of negotiating a space for the autonomous self in a domesticity that threatens to obliterate the creative woman.[139] "Lady Oracle" the poem can be read as a "gothic gone wrong", a story that is "upside-down somehow": "There were the sufferings, the hero in the mask of a villain, the villain in the mask of a hero, the

[137] Ibid., 213 for reference to big rubber raft, 230 for nourishing blob, and 40 for pillow.
[138] Ibid., 96 emphasis in the original.
[139] Shieff, "Devouring Women" in *Bodies out of Bounds* LeBesco and Braziel (eds) (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 225-226.

flights, the looming death, the sense of being imprisoned, but there was no happy ending, no true love".[140] In this way, "Lady Oracle" articulates the suppressed unhappiness of Joan's marital reality, yet it is also the mother's voice returning to the daughter, turning the daughter into her ventriloquist dummy: "It had been she standing behind me in the mirror, she was the one who was waiting around each turn, her voice whispered the words".[141] Writing may be an assertion of an autonomous self, as Sarah Shieff argues, but Joan struggles to see her own truth in the poem because autonomy appears as co-option, with the mother taking over the daughter's body once again.

Joan's "stunted" and "stunting" body is defined by grotesque acquiesce and giving, whether it is in the form of listening or having the body figuratively overtaken by another's voice. This poem thrusts Joan into fame and she is hailed as a vibrant new voice of feminist poetry. Her new feminist reputation fulfils a matrilineal destiny in finally shaping Joan in accordance to her mother (in this instance, her words). In the poem, her mother succeeds in "fashioning" Joan's public image in a way she struggled to in childhood. Ironically, this erasure of self is celebrated as an act of female creative emancipation. As Joan is defined by her mother's words, she begins to reject more thoroughly this position of grotesque compliance. She begins an affair with an experimental artist called the Royal Porcupine, who helps her escape the pressure of both conventional domesticity and feminist high culture that put similar demands onto her as a 'vessel' of pain and voice: "The Royal Porcupine had opened a time-space door to the fifth dimension, cleverly disguised as a freight elevator, and one of my selves plunged recklessly through … Not the others, though".[142] As Joan

[140] Atwood, *Lady Oracle,* 214.
[141] Ibid,. 329-330.
[142] Ibid., 268.

lives her mother's public fashioning of her, she also begins to 'live' one of her Aunt's and her own escapist dramas in reality. Through the affair Joan achieves the escapism that she created through her Costume Gothics, which she finds she no longer needs, while also enabling her to embody her history in a way she has hitherto run away from (Joan tells the Royal Porcupine about her marriage and some elements of her childhood). However, escaping grotesque compliance is also a fantasy because she is now living in the images of her mother-figures as the sad woman in a bad marriage, and a fun-loving, risk-taking adulteress respectively.

While McWilliams argues that *Lady Oracle* is a "subverted or inverted" *Bildungsroman* because the novel depicts Joan's progressive disintegration through split subjectivity, I argue that Atwood suggests Joan's progressive multiplicity and simultaneity of identity is not a deviation of women's journey to maturation but instead a key part of it, necessitated or at least supported by societal norms and expectations. Atwood explores this to a point of parody and excess in Joan's character arc by showing her need to fulfil a traditional feminine nurturing role and how this leads to her increasing disintegration. Joan's growing rejection of her role as listener and nurturer is established when Joan and Arthur take a trip to Italy to reconnect. They stumble across a fountain of Diana of Ephesus, a goddess of nature, virginity and fertility that features a woman covered in breasts that spout water. Joan rejects the image of womanhood as one of grotesque giving, which she has occupied in all of her separate identities as politically-engaged wife for Arthur, as a writer of domestic and social unhappiness for other feminist women and her mother, as a writer of fantasy and romance for her lonely readers of her popular romances: "Once I would have seen her as an image of myself, but not anymore. My ability to give was limited, I was not

inexhaustible. I was not serene, not really. I wanted things, for myself".[143] Joan's simultaneity of identity, in occupying various public and private roles, is not an aberration of womanhood but has instead been normalized, naturalised and mythically linked to femininity. Joan's stunted female *Bildungsroman* is not a radical deviation of the norm but is played with as the norm in this novel.

Joan's past comes back to haunt her when she loses avenues to escape from the grotesque performance of conventional domesticity. The return of figures from her past is triggered when the fantasy with the Royal Porcupine ends due to his desire for the same domesticity she wants to escape. The fantasies of the Fat Lady return when Joan attempts to tell Arthur of her affair, only this time Joan has less control over her narrative. As they sit watching the Olympics on the television, the Fat Lady returns "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".[144] Joan is unable to halt the fantasies, or exert control over their endings; the Fat Lady is no longer stuck in the sideways movement, but is falling or floating out of control. The Fat Lady's floating suggests domesticity and feminine normativity have failed to fulfill their promise of mobility and freedom, offering only a return of the past. The Fat Lady is the first of many figures from her past, real and imagined, that threaten to reveal her as the grotesque performer that she is, and was. This threat is made literal by failed writer Fraser Buchanan who blackmails Joan after unearthing her identity as Louisa K. Delacourt, author of many Costume Gothics, her past as a fat girl, and her affair with the Royal Porcupine.

[143] Ibid., 276.
[144] Ibid., 298.

Joan pursues a second "rebirth" to escape her impending revelation, but this time it is by faking her death. Her second rebirth shares similarities with the first. It involves a threatening knife incident when someone sticks a porcupine to her door, which is reminiscent of her mother sticking the knife in Joan's arm. During her weight loss rebirth Joan projects her aunt into a fairy godmother role, which she now reformulates into a gothic victim-villain plot with Arthur as the figure at the heart of it. Joan's attribution of her transformation to a single person or catalyst gives it a meaning, destiny and sense that is divorced from herself: "Perhaps one person was doing the animals, another the notes, a third the phone calls… but I couldn't believe that. It had to be a single person, with a plan, a plot that had some end in view."[145] Her second rebirth also ends in a metaphorical death, by faking her demise in a drowning accident in a lake.

By completing the second repetition, Joan once again "kills" a grotesque version of herself: first, her fat child self through weight loss, and second, her "stunting" wifely role. However, by committing the ultimate stunt – ironically, by plunging into the depths of water, rather than flying through the air – Joan's existence is beyond the ending of conventional women's stories and she finds herself unable to imagine a new narrative: "I was waiting for something to happen, the next turn of events (a circle? a spiral?). All my life I'd been hooked on plots".[146] Instead, this time, she finds her role is being written for her. She discovers her accident is interpreted as a suicide and she is memorialised as a caricature of a tortured woman artist with a "morbid intensity", "doomed eyes" and "fits of depression".[147] Just as Joan is living when she should be dead, figures from her fiction and her past return

[145] Ibid., 318.
[146] Ibid., 338.
[147] Ibid., 341.

from the dead. Reality begins to seep into her fiction with the ageing of Felicia, the glamorous ex-wife in her Costume Gothic *Stalked by Love*: "She was losing more and more of her radiant beauty; circles were appearing beneath her eyes, lines between her brows, she had a pimple on her neck, and her complexion was becoming sallow".[148] Joan is configured as both a ghost and haunted by her own previous identities, stuck in a present without a future and unable to escape from the past.

Joan has equated futurity with female grotesque performance, unable to imagine a future outside of this negative and self-erasing performance. With both of her grotesque forms dead, the last drama she imagines is as the victim and spectator of her former grotesque embodiments when they figuratively return from the dead to visit her as ghostly apparitions. This visitation is a confrontation and imagined obliteration by her grotesque selves. These confrontations function as what Joseph Campbell identifies as the part of a traditional hero's quest in archetypal journey narratives, where the hero completes a deed to move forward, such as "a courageous act in battle or sav[ing] a life".[149] Joan has to put to rest, through a fantasy of self-destruction, her former grotesque performances in order to imagine a way forward beyond this context of self-hatred, deceit and alienation.

The first confrontation with her grotesque self is an abstract image of the Fat Lady that emerges from the clothes in which she escaped to Italy and buried in the garden of her villa. In this vision, the Fat Lady floats towards Joan and is revealed to be what she always was, the discarded child flesh Joan lost in her first transformation: "a creature composed of all the flesh that used to be mine and which must have gone

[148] Ibid., 344.
[149] Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Pantheon Books, 1949), 102.

somewhere". [150] Describing the creature as "a breast minus the nipple", the discarded flesh comes back to consume Joan once and for all. Joan imagines being taken over by her former flesh in a reverse birth: her former flesh is "pregnant" with her adult body and she imagines she is absorbed by her fat adolescent self: "Disguised, concealed, white fur choking my nose and mouth. Obliterated".[151] The final word "obliterated" suggests Joan's demise or destruction, but she goes on. In the nightmare image of being consumed by her child self, erased by the parts of her she denied – the fat lady, her fat flesh – Joan faces one of several fears. Joan's confrontation with her child flesh is a fantasy that works towards cathartic release, instead of running away from her past toward a "happy ending".

Joan imagines a second death fantasy involving her mother, another depiction of the "stunting" wifely role she has escaped. In the middle of the night Joan hears a figure climbing up the trellis and onto her balcony. Joan fears it is a reporter, but it is the ghostly, crying apparition of her mother Frances. Joan shakes the balcony doors until they are forced open, and in removing the divide between her mother and herself, she gives in to what she perceives as her destiny with/as her mother. Yet, her mother disappears and she is left standing on the balcony alone. This episode is another death fantasy: "She'd come very close that time, she'd almost done it. She'd never really let go of me because I had never let her go".[152] Afterwards, Joan faces the reality that the spectral image of her mother is her own creation, and that in defying her, succumbing to her wishes, and finally becoming her and giving her a voice in "Lady Oracle", she could make neither her mother nor herself happy and "maybe it was time for me to stop trying": "She needed her freedom also; she had been my

[150] Atwood *Lady Oracle*, 320-321.
[151] Ibid., 321.
[152] Ibid., 330.

reflection too long".[153] The death fantasies lived out between Joan, the Fat Lady and Frances, suggest a resolution with the past and away from the gothic imagery that evokes these images as threats.

In the closing chapters, Atwood depicts a coming together of Joan's separate selves that challenges the view that Joan is left in a state of total disintegration. Joan puts to rest the ghostly figures of the Fat Lady, her mother, and faces her other separate selves to achieve something close to a coherent sense of self, literalised in the new Costume Gothic novel she is writing, *Stalked by Love*, when fiction and reality collapse. Joan's multiple selves are brought to the centre of a fictional maze and Atwood has revealed that in her conception, "the maze in *Lady Oracle* is a descent into the underworld. There is a passage in Virgil's Aeneid which I found very useful, where Aeneas goes to the underworld to learn about his future. He's guided by the sibyl and he learns what he has to from his dead father, and then returns home".[154] In this episode Joan (the "sibyl" or oracle) enters the underworld to pass into her future. In the fantasy Joan is the latest wife of *Stalked in Love* hero Redmond and her former selves are his earlier wives: "We are all Lady Redmond".[155] Joan is faced with distortions of her past selves but the fantasy comes to reveal a reality. Joan sees her former selves not as a threat or as rivals, but as victims. They warn Joan of imminent peril at the hands of her murderous husband; however, they are also configured as separate and alien to Joan: "She was trapped here with these women".[156] The women can be explained as a gothic literalisation of what Felski calls "the transference of allegiance," of the heroine, "from a heterosexual relationship to one of intimacy

[153] Ibid., 330.
[154] Rigney Hill, *Margaret Atwood: A Critical Inquiry* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1987), 71.
[155] Ibid., 341.
[156] Ibid., 341.

between women".[157] The women warn Joan of the peril she faces at the hands of Redmond, whose face morphs into that of Paul, the Royal Porcupine and finally, Arthur. This episode shies away from the too-comforting trappings of the feminist emancipation narratives that Felski describes as the "feminist" *Bildungsromans* that typically emerged in the 1970s. This uncanny self-communion also holds possibilities for Joan. In the maze Joan stops running and faces herself which signals her first positive step towards gaining control over a split subjectivity that threatens to consume her. If, as Felski argues, the female communion typically "involves overcoming the negative value which women have been conditioned to place upon their own sex", in this act Joan begins to overcome the negative value she has placed on herself for her imperfections, her "messiness" and her lack of coherency.[158] In the maze Joan faces her fears of being secretly grotesque and inadequate, and undeserving of love and sympathy.

The coming together of Joan's identities and her burial of her mother and child self suggests both Joan's maturation and the journey to self-knowledge. As Atwood observes, in the end Joan "will be able to say 'O.K. that's really who I am … take it or leave it'".[159] However, she leaves it open as to whether this new knowledge will result in demonstrable change for Joan. The novel ends with Joan's discovery by a reporter, who will reveal Joan's faked death and her multiple deceptions to his readership. After an altercation with the reporter, Joan nurses the largely nondescript man (indescribable through his apparent ordinariness) and the novel ends with the strong possibility that she will be exposed. Tolan suggests that Joan is "trapped in a nightmarish cycle of narrative" and this is supported by her return to fantasy, albeit in

[157] Felski, *Feminist Literature and Social Change* (Harvard University Press, 1989), 138.
[158] Ibid., 138.
[159] J. R. Struthers, "Playing around" in *Margaret Atwood: Conversations*, Earl G. Ingersoll (ed) (London: Virago, 1992), 66.

the form of science fiction rather than Costume Gothics.[160] Frank Davey also makes a compelling argument for Joan's continued entrapment in her own Gothic plots through the physical altercation with the reporter:

> Her attack with the Cinzano bottle is merely another instance of her fantasizing a man to be a Gothic villain; her decision to stay with and help her victim seems based not on a new sense of self but on the 'nurse' fantasy which patterned the novels of her first lover Paul …[161]

The cyclical nature of *Lady Oracle* supports Davey's and Tolan's reading that the end of the novel is also the beginning when Joan begins to tell her story to the reporter. But as McWilliams notes, years later in *The Blind Assassin* (2000) Atwood reveals herself to be "just as involved in literary game playing as Joan Foster" which suggests that *Lady Oracle* does not necessarily end with an absolute promise of definitive change but "marks the beginning of a new set of textual choices" for the author as much as for her character.[162]

Although it is in question whether Joan learns anything at the conclusion she manages to banish her history of self-loathing that contributed to the split in her subjectivity and accepts she will always be an "untidy" person. Joan's self-image, at the heart of her need for reinvention and transformation, makes room for her multiple selves, which suggests forward movement. Her cathartic death fantasies and ghostly communion along with her retelling her past to the reporter suggest her acceptance of issues with her past and she is finally able to tell her story, or a different one at least. As a novel featuring a fat child turned thin adult who hides her past, Atwood creates a story that explores, in satirical form, a fractured identity arising from gendered alienation and the pressures of conformity. Behind Joan's cyclical storylines is an

[160] Tolan, *Margaret Atwood: Feminism and Fiction* (Rodopi, 2007), 64.
[161] Frank Davey, *Margaret Atwood: A Feminist Poetics* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1984), 76.
[162] McWilliams, *Margaret Atwood and the Female Bildungsroman* (Ashgate, 2009), 88.

exploration of gender, size and histories of self-loathing and the ways in which women participate in and propagate these narratives.

In *Lady Oracle* Atwood explores how fatness and weight loss are intimately connected to Joan Foster's uneven and difficult experience of girlhood and womanhood. Atwood explores how size contributes to and intersects with Joan's experience of toxic gender norms and escapist romance. Joan's journey to maturity is disrupted by her feelings of alienation from cultures of femininity and desirability and her attempts to distance what she perceives to be a shameful history of fat. Joan's re-entry into fantasy explores the intersection of gender, size and the politics of self-loathing and denial. Atwood satirises the tropes of the *Bildungsroman* genre through *Lady Oracle*'s cyclicality and finally undermines the primary logic of the form: the linear movement from innocence to knowledge.

A study of *Lady Oracle* reveals a satirical and tragicomic representation of fatness. Atwood explores the relationship between gender expression and size, as a battleground between mother and daughter, with her weight representing her own and her family's failures. Atwood explores the importance of size and appearance in policing femininity, and the ways in which Joan's freedom to reinvent herself involves acquiescing to an ultimately dangerous culture of escapism and mystique for women. My reading points to how *Lady Oracle*, as representative example of the themes that recur in fictions of fatness in the 1970s, reflects a character that spends their story seeking escape from fat bodies even after weight loss. Atwood's tragicomic protagonist participates in her own nightmarish spiralling out of control in pursuit of conventional femininity and domesticity to explore the insidious effects of a culture that delimits the opportunities and lives of women of size, to the point of self-destruction. *Lady Oracle* is a keystone text for critiquing the transformational

logic that invests in overnight change, and for exploring notions of complicity and participation in one's oppression. In the next chapter on Wally Lamb's recovery novel *She's Come Undone* (1992), I examine how the representation of fat characters' journeys to selfhood and their struggles for maturity continue in the 1990s in the form of abuse narratives. In particular, I examine Lamb's representation of protagonist Dolores Price's rape and subsequent recovery to interrogate the representation of fat, illness and trauma.

Chapter Three

Rewriting *Lolita:* Consumption, Abuse and Recovery in Wally Lamb's *She's Come Undone*

One of the most significant moments in Wally Lamb's first novel, *She's Come Undone* (1992), occurs in therapy when protagonist Dolores Price recounts her rape at age 13. After having a major breakthrough, she notes simply "I'm empty", to which her therapist replies, "You're triumphant!"[1] This chapter examines Dolores's journey from rape to supposedly triumphant recovery, analysing Lamb's engagement with the conventions of the recovery novel, a genre that depicts suffering as a mode of character development. Through an intertextual reading of *She's Come Undone* with Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (1958), this chapter argues that Lamb emphasises the voice of the abused girl marginalised in social and literary history prior to the 1990s by rewriting the tragic story of Lolita and the metaphors associated with her abuse in three significant ways.[2] Firstly, Lamb evokes the metaphor of consumption to make visible Dolores's pain on her body and explore the impact of silence around painful events. Secondly, the feeder/consumer relationship is shifted to the mother/daughter relationship where Dolores's mother feeds her daughter to excess out of a misjudged attempt to comfort her daughter and atone for an affair with Dolores's rapist. Thirdly, Lamb reworks the metaphor of magic, linked to Humbert's abusive desire in *Lolita*, into a metaphor for Dolores's non-linear and uneven healing and recovery from

[1] Wally Lamb, *She's Come Undone* (London: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 278.
[2] Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita* (London: Penguin, 2000 [1955; [1970]).

trauma in *She's Come Undone*. While recovery novels have been critiqued by Janice Peck for fusing "public issues and private problems" without adequate political analysis and Lauren Berlant as "juxtapolitical" because "the political is deemed an elsewhere managed by elites who are … not interested in the well-being of ordinary people or life-worlds," this chapter argues that Lamb creates a recovery novel that engages with the political on a representational level by inserting the abused girl's voice into literary history and creating a new imaginary for recovery out of a history of violence.[3]

Set over the period of 1952 to 1992, *She's Come Undone* focuses on the psychological journey of 40-year-old Dolores Price as she recalls her early life. Dolores's retrospective narration begins by detailing a tumultuous childhood that is defined by her father's affairs and his violence towards her mother. Following her parents' separation, Dolores's mother Bernice suffers a mental breakdown, leading to mother and daughter moving from Rhode Island to Wayland, Pennsylvania to live with Dolores's devoutly Catholic grandmother. It is at her grandmother's house that a married neighbour, Jack, rapes Dolores. The rape sends mother and daughter into a co-dependent spiral of guilt and overconsumption. Dolores spends her adolescence consuming junk food, television soap operas and popular novels until she weighs 260 pounds. Dolores's self-destructive bingeing only comes to an end when Bernice dies in a freak car accident. Her mother's death sends Dolores spiralling into a new set of difficult circumstances, which include a failed attempt to acclimatise to college, an attempted suicide in the waters of Cape Cod, and an extended period of therapy during which she uncovers the repressed memory that her mother was having an affair

[3] Janice Peck, *The Age of Oprah: Cultural Icon for the Neoliberal Era* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm, 2008), 15. Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 3.

with her rapist at the time of her rape. Dolores is committed to a psychiatric unit for seven years, under the care of a maverick psychotherapist Dr. Shaw, and it is there that she finds her voice and loses weight, though she leaves before she completes her therapy.

Dolores's psychological rebirth sees her track down the boyfriend of her college roommate, now a high school teacher, a man whose letters she intercepted in her short college career and to whom she was attracted. They get married, but Dolores ends the relationship after an extended period of marital abuse and infidelities, including her husband's affair with one of his students. Dolores finally returns to her grandmother's home, depressed after the dissolution of her marriage and her grandmother's death, but Dolores is gradually brought out of her despondent state by caring figures from her past who are now suffering from several different debilitating illnesses. She enrols in college for a second time, finds a feminist community and meets a man who is nothing like the violent men who have defined her life. By the close of the novel she is married again and struggling to get pregnant. The novel concludes as Dolores looks out to sea, watching a whale, which is a recurring motif that Lamb deploys to represent her psychological and spiritual health. As a concluding image, it suggests that Dolores may have the psychological strength to endure. *She's Come Undone* is intriguing for literary scholars and for academics whose work engages with fat studies for the ways in which Lamb depicts the visceral experience of trauma after rape in the form of compulsive eating and both critiques and extends the conventions of the recovery novel.

She's Come Undone is one of several novels of fat embodiment published in the 1990s, including Mary Gaitkill's *Two Girls, Fat and Thin* (1991) and Sapphire's

Push (1996), to feature recuperative depictions of sexual abuse victims.[4] Lamb, Gaitskill and Sapphire depict stories of survival following sexual abuse, social connection after trauma, and journeys of psychological wellbeing. In the 1990s novels, fat characters struggle with unresolved trauma after abuse, shame and self-control as they achieve what constitutes a hopeful, if not happy, ending in the context of their story. These novels speak to a moment when US culture and communities alike were grappling with issues of silence and victim-blaming that followed the child abuse "epidemic", which refers to the 125-per cent rise in the incidence of child sexual abuse from 1986 to 1993.[5] The 1980s child abuse "epidemic" had broad cultural, political and legal implications for American society.[6] Nancy Whittier in a study of the history and politics of child sexual abuse argues that child sexual abuse prevention and education programmes from the mid-1980s drew heavily from feminist consciousness-raising efforts around sexual abuse, which integrated a greater understanding of the links between incest, rape and patriarchal society into mainstream culture.[7] Moreover, these novels were produced during a period in which fatness and sexual abuse were beginning to be explored in increasing detail in medical

[4] Mary Gaitskill, *Two Girls, Fat and Thin* (New York and London: Simon & Schuster, 1991); Sapphire, *Push* (New York: Vintage, 1996).

[5] A.J. Sedlak and D.D. Broadhurst, *Third National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect* (Washington, DC: US Department of Health and Human Service, 1993). The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) on behalf of the US Department of Justice shows that in the 1980s states experienced "10-percent annual increases in child abuse caseloads". See, David Finkelhor and Lisa M. Jones, "Explanations for the Decline in Child Sexual Abuse Cases" in Juvenile Justice Bulletin, *US Department of Justice Office of Justice* (January 2004), 3.

[6] See, Richard Beck, *We Believe the Children: A Moral Panic in the 1980s* (New York: Public Affairs, 2015); Nancy Whittier, *The Politics of Child Sexual Abuse: Emotion, Social Movements and the State* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), Stephen M. Krason, *Child Abuse, Family Rights, and the Child Protective System: A Critical Analysis from Law, Ethics, and Catholic Social Teaching* (Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2013) and John E. B. Myers, *Child Protection in America: Past, Present, and Future State* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

[7] Whittier, *The Politics of Child Sexual Abuse* (Oxford University Press, 2009), 119. The earliest feminist critics who discussed incest, rape and its links to patriarchal society include: Florence Rush, *The Best Kept Secret: Sexual Abuse of Children* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1980); Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape* (London and New York: Simon and Schuster, 1975); Sandra Butler, *Conspiracy of Silence: The Trauma of Incest* (California: Volcano Press, 1996); Louise Armstrong, *Rocking the Cradle of Sexual Politics, What Happened When Women Said Incest* (New York: The Women's Press, 1996).

studies. Psychologist V.J. Felitti shifted medical understandings of fatness from psychosexual to sociocultural and traumatic by establishing a link between obesity and sexual abuse in 1991 and 1993.[8] Lamb's novel stands out for its engagement with trauma and violence in relation to its overt intertextual relationship to a broader literary tradition of abused girl characters.

To analyse these themes of the fat girl's body as a metaphor of a painful history, I extend Sharon Monteith's analysis of the fat body as a vault of history in a southern family saga. In a larger study of interracial friendships in southern fiction, Monteith posits that 600-pound Victoria Grace Ransom, in Carol Dawson's *Body of Knowledge* (1994), is a "body of language and a signifier of history at its most aleatory. Victoria exists as a cipher of the Ransom dynasty and its accumulated sorrows".[9] She gorges herself on food and she stores a century of family and regional history that has been "fed" to her in the form of stories with each meal by the family's black housekeeper: "she is the living Ransom text – and she must learn to read herself in order to write herself out of the hold that the burden of history has had on her person".[10] When Victoria begins to write, "The fat that has impeded her falls away as her confidence in her own language and ability to tell her own history increases".[11] Dawson's 500-page novel is a very different fiction to Lamb's. As Monteith points out, marriage never figures in the novel and Victoria remains a virgin; her body is

[8] V.J. Felitti, "Childhood sexual abuse, depression, and family dysfunction in adult obese patients: a case control study" *Southern Medical Journal* 86.7 (1993). The link between obesity, eating disorders and sexual abuse continues to be examined in medical literature; see B.F Fuemmeler, E. Dedert, F.J. McClernon and J.C. Beckham, "Adverse childhood events are associated with obesity and disordered eating: Results from a US population-based survey of young adults" *Journal of Trauma and Stress*, 22 (2009).
[9] Sharon Monteith, *Advancing Sisterhood? Interracial Friendships in Contemporary Southern Fiction*. (London: University of Georgia Press, 2000), 158.
[10] Ibid., 156.
[11] Ibid., 156.

"not described biologically at any point" either.[12] Adapting and extending Monteith's analysis to the abused girl character, I argue that Dolores's body may be read as another kind of living text: a tome of trauma. Lamb's writing has received very little critical attention, but his first novel is as a key text in the fictionalising of sexual abuse and fatness because it draws into focus how trauma is made visible on the body in the form of fat. Lamb's novel speaks to a major theme in this thesis – the significance that embodied journeys towards psychological wellbeing have in fictions of fatness – and is an example of a fiction that complicates the idea that a protagonist can forge a trajectory towards wellness, authenticity and knowledge through bodily change.

Although *She's Come Undone* was published in 1992, it became a bestseller when it was featured on Oprah Winfrey's book club in 1997. Oprah's talk show popularised the recovery novel from 1995 onwards and resonated with the central tenets of the recovery movement that appeared in the 1980s, which popularised new approaches to mental health through deinstitutionalisation and community self-help, and discusses recovery as a personal journey as opposed to a set outcome.[13] The recovery novel has been defined as a "therapeutic narrative," and a "redemption narrative," and is best understood as a journey from psychological struggle to recovery. A recovery novel typically follows a female protagonist as she negotiates difficult circumstances and troubling relationships. The origins of the genre can be

[12] Ibid,. 159.

[13] Recovery movement critic Brooks Alexander argues that while the origins of the recovery movement can be traced back to the romantic period, the recovery movement has four major antecedents: 1) the disease concept of alcoholism, 2) Alcoholics Anonymous and the Oxford group, 3) 'materialistic' and Freudian psychology, and 4) human 'potentialism' and New Age philosophy. Quoted in John Ankerberg and John Weldon, *The Facts on Self Esteem, Psychology, and the Recovery Movement* (Palm Springs: ATRI Publishing, 2011), 315. For more on the recovery movement, see, Thomas Szasz, *The Manufacture of Madness: A Comparative Study of the Inquisition and the Mental Health Movement* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1997).

traced back to confessional writing, but the plot also coincides with the female *Bildungsroman*.[14] While the *Bildungsroman* depicts a protagonist's growth towards maturity, recovery novels typically depict a protagonist's suffering followed by character change.[15] Janice Peck, Lauren Berlant, and Eva Illouz have identified a recognisable pattern from Oprah's book club choices, and identify three overarching conventions: recovery novels invert the formula of the tragedy, which means "the awful end is always at the beginning"; they tend to focus on overcoming the conditions that caused trauma instead of seeking justice; and male characters tend to be indifferent and violent or unglamorous and nurturing, but they are fundamentally unchanging.[16] *She's Come Undone* expands what Illouz calls the "inverted tragedy" formula in its rewriting of *Lolita*, and Lamb subverts and unsettles the recovery novel's reassuring formula. While current criticisms of Oprah's Book Club choices focus on their limited political critique, less attention has been paid to how authors complicate and undermine the conventions of the genre from within the genre itself.

As a recovery novel or an "inverted tragedy" about child abuse, I read *She's Come Undone* as a novel in dialogue with other fictions about abused girls. It is clear from Dolores's name and the overwhelming plot similarities with *Lolita,* which are explored below, that *She's Come Undone* is speaking back to Nabokov's text, and rewriting the story from the perspective of the abused instead of the abuser. Nabokov scholars have analysed the relationship between narrator Humbert and Dolores "Lolita" Haze through the aesthetics and ethics of the novel, and return to the

[14] Confessional fiction is defined by J. A. Cuddon *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* (London and New York: Penguin; New Ed edition 1999) as a "vague category" that refers to "works that are a very personal and subjective account of experiences, beliefs, feelings and states of mind, body and soul", 174.
[15] Eva Illouz, *Oprah Winfrey and the Glamour of Misery: An Essay on Popular Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 104.
[16] Illouz, Oprah Winfrey and the Glamour of Misery (Columbia University Press, 2003), 108. Peck, *The Age of Oprah* (Paradigm, 2008). Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint* (Duke University Press, 2008).

representation of Lolita as consumer/commodity, victim/participant, playful text/subversive subject. Feminist and materialist cultural analyses such as that from Linda Kauffman and Gladys M. Clifton have argued Lolita is made into a commodity through Humbert's exploitation, but Rachel Bowlby discusses the character of Lolita as the ultimate American consumer: "Lolita does not so much represent innocence and virginity" as "the crude embodiment of a different kind of victim: one subject to and made over in the image of a mass culture with which she has completely identified". [17] In these analyses, four conclusions are clear: firstly, Lolita is an inscrutable character in that she reflects her abuser's projections and she is "created" through the gaze of another, typically an older man.[18] Secondly, Lolita has an appetite for junk food and popular culture. Thirdly, her death is tragic and premature. Lastly, Lolita's tragic end reflects a tradition of death and loss in stories of "nymphet" characters.[19] Bowlby argues that the Lolita as a nymphet, a perceived precocious girl between the ages of 9 and 14, is "no sooner identified by the male narrator than she is placed definitively out of reach . . . because her life span as a 'nymphet' is limited to just a year or two". [20] In the second part of this chapter, I examine how Lamb subverts these four elements in Dolores who is constructed as an inversion of Lolita: while Lolita is unreadable to Humbert, Dolores wears her secrets on her body in the form of fat; while Lolita is captured in time as Humbert writes her into his text, Dolores is

[17] Linda Kauffman, *Special Delivery: Epistolary Modes in Modern Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Gladys M. Clifton in "Humbert Humbert and the Limits of Artistic License" in *Nabokov's Fifth Arc: Nabokov and Others on his Life's Work,* J.E. Rivers and Charles Nicol (eds) (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982); Rachel Bowlby, *Shopping With Freud* (New York and London: Taylor Francis, 2006), 52.
[18] Edda Margeson in "Tracing Lolita: Defining the Archetype of the Nymphet in 20th and 21st Century Literature and Culture" *Emergence* 3 (2012), 1-12.
[19] Nabokov popularised this image in Humbert's desire for 12-year-old Lolita, but Nabokov was drawing on a longer history of nymphet figures in history. For instance, Humbert's first love Annabel Leigh who dies in adolescence is an intertextual allusion to the title character of Edgar Allan Poe's 1849 "Annabel Lee", a girl that also dies in youth.
[20] Bowlby in *Shopping with Freud* (Taylor Francis, 2006), 39.

stuck in time reliving the experience in flashbacks and nightmares; while Lolita dies young, Dolores lives a regular lifespan and the novel has a hopeful ending.

Analysing Dolores's rape and recovery demands approaching fat through trauma theory. Cathy Caruth has summarised trauma as a stress response to an overwhelming event that is unassimilated in the moment, defies comprehension and language, and renders a person out of sync with time.[21] Trauma is a *temporal* disorder, which means that traumatic events do not simply occur "in time" but that they fracture time making the event ever present: "the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it".[22] Lamb rewrites Lolita who is immortalised into text by Humbert as a traumatised girl who lives out a traumatic cyclicality. Lamb draws on fatness as metaphor, as Dawson does in *Body of Knowledge*, to represent the *bodily* experience of trauma that is compounded by gender in an historical and social context. The novel offers a different representation of trauma than currently defines trauma fiction criticism, which is reflected in Roger Luckhurst's *The Trauma Question* (2008), which criticises the Caruthian model for creating a "trauma genre" that prioritises fictions that are more experimental and avant-garde leaving other more realist forms excluded, therefore limiting and narrowing studies of trauma in fiction.[23] Building on Luckhurst's criticism of trauma fiction, Alan Gibbs in *Contemporary American Trauma Narratives* (2014) argues that trauma genre fiction has entrenched a "literality" around trauma, in which writers attempt to transmit trauma's effects to the reader through "digressions, diversions and prevarications in narrative trajectory; and dispersal or fragmenting of narrative personae": "Experimental forms have been even

[21] Cathy Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (London: Johns Hopkins University, 1995).
[22] Ibid., 4-5.
[23] Roger Luckhurst *The Trauma Question* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008).

more insistently prescribed in the representation of the allegedly literal character of trauma".[24] By exploring trauma through the metaphor of Dolores's growing body, Lamb subverts the concept of depicting trauma "literality" by focusing on through bodily metaphor and realistic description.

Lamb's novel evokes body and bodily metaphor to explore the viscerality and invisibility of sexual abuse trauma, particularly for women, as well as reflects an intevention into the intersections between gender, trauma and rewriting history that is emerging in trauma scholarship. In the edited collection *Trauma Narratives and Herstory* (2013), Sonya Andermahr and Silvia Pellicer-Ortín noted how rewriting and "challeng[ing] official versions of patriarchal history" is a predominant theme in narratives exploring womanhood and trauma.[25] These narratives, Andermahr and Pellicer-Ortín argue, point to the importance of "distinguish[ing] between patriarchal and feminist viewpoints" to the representation of women's pain and violence.[26] I connect Lamb's novel to Nabokov's *Lolita* as an example of a return to controversial and sensational depictions of girls abuse in fiction to "distinguish between patriarchal and feminist viewpoints" of abuse and rewrite this literary erasure and sexualisation, an overlooked element of trauma narratives. By manifesting trauma on Dolores's fat, adolescent body, Lamb rewrites and challenges a representational and literary history where sexualised violence is a figurative signifier for something other than the actual abuse or exploitation of girls and women.

At a crucial turning point in *She's Come Undone*, Dolores's neighbour and soon-to-be rapist Jack Speight draws the reader's attention to the intertextual links

[24] Alan Gibbs, *Contemporary American Trauma Narratives* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 17.
[25] Sonya Andermahr and Silvia Pellicer-Ortín (eds), *Trauma Narratives and Herstory* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2013), 4-5.
[26] Ibid., 4-5.

between *She's Come Undone* and Nabokov's *Lolita*. During a family meal, Jack tells twelve-year-old Dolores the etymological meaning of her name: "You know what 'Dolores' means? … It's Latin, means sadness. Our Lady of Sorrow. Why are you so sad?"[27] Lamb's gesture toward naming in this episode evokes intertextual links with Dolores Haze's abuse by Humbert Humbert in Nabokov's *Lolita*. Dolores is famous etymologically and literary for sad, tragic girls. A novel that parodies the confessional form as well as subverting the romance novel, erotic novel and the detective genre, *Lolita* explores the seductive power of literature in the way it positions the reader as complicit in Humbert's romanticized story of his abuse of twelve-year-old Dolores Haze. In *Lolita* the abused girl is reduced to a text in Humbert's retelling, as signified in Humbert's renaming of Dolores as "Lolita", which as Thomas Karshan notes, "suggest[s] litterae, or 'letters' in Latin".[28] In Humbert's final and ultimate act of possessing Dolores Haze, he immortalises her in "the refuge of art".[29] Lolita the girl and *Lolita* the text testify to modernist Nabokov's "love affair" with the English language, to paraphrase his Afterword, with Lolita representing an attraction to linguistic free play.[30] Dolores Haze's sorrow is written out, subsumed by Humbert's desire, and emerges only as an ephemeral "haze" at the edge of Humbert's text and Nabokov's aesthetic project. Lamb returns to *Lolita* to depict, as Dolores Price's full name suggests, the price of abuse by radically revising the "nymphet" and her story.

She's Come Undone resonates with— and departs from— the plot of *Lolita* in several key ways. *Lolita* opens with Humbert recalling the origin of his obsession with young girls, beginning with Annabel Leigh who died before they could

[27] Lamb, *She's Come Undone,* 75.
[28] Thomas Karshan, "Vladimir Nabokov's Lolita and Free Play" in Elizabeth Boyle and Anne-Marie Evans (eds) *Reading America: New Perspectives on the American Novel* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008), 99.
[29] Nabokov, *Lolita*, 309.
[30] Ibid., 316.

consummate their young love. In adulthood, Humbert's desire is focused on Dolores Haze, whom he christens "Lolita", to whom he gains closer access by moving into her mother Charlotte's house as a lodger. Humbert's desire for Lolita leads him to marry Charlotte but his true intentions are discovered when Charlotte finds his diary. His access to Lolita is secured by Charlotte's untimely death in a car accident, making him her legal guardian. The novel's main action takes place on the road after Humbert collects Lolita from school and starts evading suspicious strangers and the authorities. Humbert makes a commodity out of Lolita, raping her at age 12 and coercing sexual favours from her thereafter in exchange for money, material goods and simply candy. Lolita is described as "the ideal consumer, the subject and object of every foul poster", and Humbert is attracted to and scornful of the consumer culture that she embodies in her desires and being.[31] They eventually settle in New England for Lolita to attend school, but she escapes with Humbert's nemesis, Clare Quilty. Humbert spends the rest of the narrative searching for Lolita and eventually finds her when she is 16 and settled into a domestic life. Going by the name Dolly, her mother's name for her, the girl once known as Lolita is now married and pregnant. Humbert expresses regret for his exploitation of her, but he also claims it is distinct from Quilty's crimes because of his sincere love for Lolita. Humbert eventually murders Quilty in a self-professed act of fatherly revenge for Lolita and, at the end of the novel he is serving jail time for this crime. In the foreword that frames Humbert's diary, the reader learns that Dolly, or "Lolita" dies at age 17 delivering a stillborn baby.

Lamb explores the impact and effects of abuse by reworking key plot points, images and motifs from *Lolita*. A significant metaphor Lamb reworks is the metaphor of consumption and abuse. Lolita has been interpreted as both consumer and

[31] Ibid., 148.

commodity, with an insatiable appetite for America's consumer culture. When Humbert and Lolita are on the road her predilection for shiny, glittery consumerism is outlined:

> If a roadside sign said: VISIT OUR GIFT SHOP–we had to visit it, had to buy its Indian curios, dolls, copper jewelry, cactus candy. The words 'novelties and souvenirs' simply entranced her by their trochaic lilt. If some cafe sign proclaimed Ice cold Drinks, she was automatically stirred, although all drinks everywhere were ice-cold. She it was to whom ads were dedicated: the ideal consumer, the subject and object of every foul poster.[32]

Lolita's appetite for material goods has been interpreted as evidence of naivety and pleasure, but most often, her victimhood. However, Lolita's relationship with consumer culture can also be understood as a method of surviving Humbert's sustained abuse. Lolita's attraction to consumer culture could be interpreted as partly playing up to Humbert's image of teenage American girls for her increased visibility and safety in public (Lolita's demands to stop at every available opportunity make sense if one is stuck in a car with an abuser). Denis Jones notes that Lolita, "exploits the fictional image he [Humbert] has created for her and the power it confers upon her to dictate terms". [33] Humbert's impression of Lolita's naivety in blithely accepting truth in advertisements does not line up with the sharp and witty girl who resists through her dialogue Humbert's idealised view of their relationship.[34] For instance, she identifies their relationship for what it is – "the word is incest" – and outsmarts him in her eventual escape.[35] At the novel's end, Lolita's savvy independence is also reinforced when Humbert remembers an overheard remark Lolita delivered to one of

[32] Ibid., 148.
[33] Denis Jonnes, *Cold War American Literature and the Rise of Youth Culture Children of Empire*, (Routledge, 2014), 119.
[34] In Nabokov's *Lolita*, Humbert describes Lolita as vulgar 44, 65-66, consciously alluring 159, and stupid 151.
[35] Lolita also mocks Humbert's speech: "You talk like a book, *Dad*"; and mimics him: "Was the corroboration satisfactory?", 141.

her friends that makes him realise how little he knew her: "I simply did not know a thing about my darling's mind and … behind the awful juvenile clichés, there was in her a garden and a twilight and a palace gate – dim and adorable regions which happened to be lucidly and absolutely forbidden to me".[36] Considering what Alexander Dolinin notes as Nabokov's own disdain for generalisation, it is not too far of a logical leap to suggest her consumption of consumer products is also particular to her abusive situation (Lolita-as-abused-child) as opposed to a generalised icon of consumerism (Lolita-as-All-American-Girl).[37] Lamb evokes consumption, so frequently associated with Lolita's powerlessness, to explore the impact of abuse and silence around traumatic events. Lamb engages differently with the idea of women's trauma narratives "distinguish[ing] between patriarchal and feminist viewpoints on history", in the way Lamb constructs a counterpoint to Nabokov's eroticised, abstract representation of sexual abuse.[38]

Lamb begins *She's Come Undone* with 40-year-old narrator Dolores recalling the story of her past. Whereas in *Lolita* Dolores Haze is described as seduced by every advertisement, Lamb establishes that Dolores's over-consumption is linked to emotional disarray. In the earliest of Dolores's childhood memories, she describes developing an oral fixation in relation to a childhood marred by recurring marital domestic violence and episodic neglect. Dolores's father is verbally and physically abusive towards Dolores's mother Bernice, causing Dolores to comfort herself by chewing objects: "Sometimes when my father's voice gets too loud at my mother, I

[36] Nabokov, *Lolita,* 259.
[37] Considering Nabokov's own disdain for generalisation, it is not too far of a logical leap to suggest her consumption of consumer products is also particular to her abusive situation (Lolita-as-abused-child) as opposed to a generalised icon of consumerism (Lolita-as-All-American-Girl). Alexander Dolinin in "Nabokov's Time Doubling: From The Gift to Lolita" *Nabokov Studies* 2 (1995) discusses how "neglecting details and thinking in generic terms (nymphet/non-nymphet), Humbert Humbert commits what is according to Nabokov the deadliest epistemological sin, the sin of generalisation, which renders the world and its mysteries impenetrable", 24.
[38] Andermahr and Pellicer-Ortín (eds), *Trauma Narratives and Herstory* (Palgrave, 2013), 4-5.

go out to the parlor and put a checker in my mouth – suck it, passing my mouth over the grooved edge".[39] Lamb links this history of violence and unhappiness to the origins of her overeating, which gets worse when Dolores's father begins an affair with his wealthy employer Mrs. Masicotte. When aged four Dolores accompanies her father on visits to Mrs. Masicotte, she binges on food and teases Mrs. Masicotte's "fat dog" Zahra, who pines for the cookies she is eating while the adults are in another room. It is in observing Zahra's desperate hunger, waiting for her father to leave, that Dolores learns her "first lesson in the awful strength of coveting, the power of want".[40] In a theatrical display, Dolores burns a paper-doll and pretends to die, but "the dog – riveted, unblinking – sees only the sugar-crusted cookies".[41] Zahra contributes to the dramatisation of the destructive power of lust and gluttony that speaks to the lust of her father in his affair and Dolores's potential for self-destruction.

The scene with Mrs. Masicotte's dog recalls an episode in *Lolita* where Lolita's childish play with a dog is observed by Humbert. An intertextual comparison of these episodes reveals how Lamb revises and reworks the text. Humbert believes Lolita's play to be disingenuous, innocence performed for the attentions of the other man, suggesting that she bounces a ball with such enthusiasm that "even the dog seemed puzzled by the extravagance of her reactions".[42] Humbert's bad faith interpretation of Lolita's childishness as a performance is typical of Humbert's fantasy of the nymphet as a figure that is as knowing as she is innocent and as powerful as she is powerless—and as much participant as victim. In both novels, dogs are metaphors for the power relation between adult abuser and child. Lamb switches

[39] Lamb, *She's Come Undone*, 43.
[40] Ibid,. 17.
[41] Ibid., 17.
[42] Nabokov, *Lolita,* 236-237.

the focus of the episode from the desired object to the desiring object, with the child moving from observed, objectified and deconstructed to observer. Dolores's hyperbolic drama recalls that of Lolita with her "obscene young legs madly pedaling in the air". Dolores's increasingly theatrical performances to get Zahra's attention are ignored, with the desire for the object leaving the dog blind to playfulness along with pain. That Zahra is blinded to Dolores's play in this scene can be extrapolated as an intertextual commentary on how Humbert is blind to Lolita's play, finding in it an artfulness that suits his exploitative idea of reciprocity.

The theme of tainted or contaminated innocence is central to Dolores's memory of her childhood and overconsumption and Lamb's depiction of trauma. Trauma fiction is linked to a specific disruptive aesthetic that attempts to mimic the rhythms, processes, and symptoms of trauma, which focus on neurological and cognitive disassociation. As trauma critic Laurie Vickroy has explained, "many narratives incorporate the gaps, uncertainties, dissociations, and visceral details of living through traumatic experiences as a way of immersing readers in the characters' states of mind".[43] By focusing on the act of eating, Lamb refocuses trauma not only experienced cognitively or psychologically in the mind but also emotionally and physically in the body. This reflects a different approach to what Gibb's has called a "literality" around trauma in fiction.[44] Instead of attempting to "transmit" the effects of trauma in the form of the text, Lamb depict trauma's affects in Dolores's "eating" pain, violence and secrets that eventually emerge literally on her body.

As Dolores gets older, eating is represented as symbolic of swallowing painful and shameful secrets. As her father's physical and emotional abuse of her mother

[43] Laurie Vickroy, *Reading Trauma Narratives: The Contemporary Novel and the Psychology of Oppression* (London: University of Virginia Press 2015), 3.
[44] Gibbs, *Contemporary American Trauma Narratives* (Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 17.

Bernice escalates, Dolores is afflicted with psychosomatic symptoms in the form of daily stomach-aches that her mother medicates with Maalox. One morning Dolores goes to school and begins to chew on a set of cardboard letters, for which she is admonished by her schoolteacher:

> I was about to deny it when I looked down and realised it was absolutely true: the cardboard letters on my desk were bent and misshapen and several were still dark with my saliva. There was, as well, a word builder stuck to the inside of my cheek … I was guilty as sin.[45]

The cardboard letters represent the secrets of her volatile home life that Dolores figuratively ingests over and over again. Dolores's "eating" of the secrets and "sin[s]", and her unarticulated unease, "pollute" Dolores's innocent child self. Dolores views her childhood through a lens of corruption and embattled innocence, and compulsive eating as a metaphor of a violent interaction with the adult world. Consumption is a visceral signifier of much broader and more complex depiction of trauma, circumstances and aftermath of abuse.

By connecting textuality and secrets with pollution, Lamb highlights the association of abuse and possession in *Lolita*. Dolores quite literally gets words stuck in her mouth in an intertextual allusion to the opening paragraph of *Lolita* where Humbert deconstructs the name Lolita in his mouth: "My sin, my soul. Lo-lee-ta: the tip of the tongue taking a trip of three steps down the palate to tap, at three, on the teeth. Lo. Lee. Ta".[46] Lolita is only language, a fiction that Humbert concocts that makes up the book he writes and the reader encounters. Lolita is revealed to be what she has always been: a created text that he breaks down on the tip of his tongue. The mouth in *Lolita* suggests creation and destruction, specifically the act of creating and

[45] Lamb, *She's Come Undone*, 14.
[46] Nabokov, *Lolita,* 9.

possessing the girl child. In *She's Come Undone* it also evokes a dual tension in the novel with the mouth foregrounded as the connecting space between the world and the body. Dolores's chewing of cardboard letters suggests the (de)formation of language. Humbert's slow and deliberate enunciation of Lolita "on the tip of the tongue" is contrasted with Dolores's repeated action of swallowing what she is expected to keep secret. Both acts are related to sin, with Humbert calling Lolita his sin and Dolores feeling "guilty as sin". Dolores feels guilty for keeping the secret and becoming complicit in the violence that surrounds it.

Consumption as a metaphor of violence also represents the circumstances and stressors that compound trauma, going beyond the traumatic 'event' and into family dynamics around silence and comforting. Dolores's narration frames her childhood self as an embattled innocent in an adult world that is defined by both destructive male instincts and female complicity. By framing consumption in terms of violence, Lamb subverts the comforting association of eating with sustenance and maternal comfort. In Dolores's narration Bernice is too distracted and overwhelmed to be fully present for Dolores as she grows up, which only gets worse as Bernice struggles with her husband's infidelities, abuse and a miscarriage. Bernice is emotionally unavailable and presents an image of femininity to Dolores that confirms she should swallow her pain instead of excavating and voicing it. Bernice medicates Dolores's deeper emotional issues through medicine and food, as well as teaches Dolores to sublimate her unhappiness into cultural products, such as television. Dolores's first memory is of her mother looking on excitedly as she first interacts with television, and one of the few occasions in which mother and daughter express emotions is while watching her mother's favourite talk show "Queen For a Day". In a poignant memory,

mother and daughter are invested in the sad lives of others, while their own issues are left undiscussed and unresolved, both individually and as a family.

The lack of communication between Dolores and her mother is part of a matrilineal pattern going back to Dolores's grandmother. Growing up under her mother's morality, Bernice attempts to live a more permissive, suburban lifestyle with Tony that is in stark contrast to her upbringing in her parent's "house of repression".[47] Dolores's grandmother is described as character who never cries, not even at the death of her son in a flash flood that devastates the community. While her grandmother is fundamentally supportive of her family, taking her daughter and granddaughter into her home after Bernice's marriage fails and Bernice has a nervous breakdown, her strong religious sense contributes to the barrier between herself and her daughter, and eventually her granddaughter. Catholicism, like television, is an emotional barrier between the generations. The lack of communication highlights the lack of support.

Dolores's narration gradually positions consumption not only in terms of pollution but in terms of drowning. Drowning is a meaningful motif in *She's Come Undone*: Dolores's paternal grandparents and her uncle all die by drowning in natural disasters. By evoking a language of drowning to describe episodes of binge-eating, Lamb connects the tragic history of her male relatives and their quick deaths to Dolores's slower and gradual form of "drowning" in secrets and sorrow. Dolores's tragic destiny is reinforced when Jack Speight and his wife Rita rent her grandmother's third floor apartment. Jack and Rita, individually and as a couple, enthral each generation of the Price family: "They reminded Grandma of 'the quality of people who *used* to live on Pierce Street' …. The three of us – Grandma, my

[47] Ibid., 133.

mother, and I – fell promptly and hopelessly in love".[48] They bring to her grandmother a vision of nostalgia and to Dolores and Bernice a seductive image of youth and possibility, filling the upstairs apartment with the sounds of sex and rock 'n' roll.[49] The two families are initially buoyed by each other's company but underneath the surface of their small wholesome community is the suggestion of sexuality. Dolores catches her mother looking at Jack, like herself, while at Sunday mass, intimating the future affair her mother and Jack will have: "One time I caught Ma following his movements, too, lip-synching to the offertory prayer rather than praying it".[50] The sexual tension under the surface of this domesticity are reaffirmed when Dolores's family go to the Speights for dinner and she reflects her mother had flirted with Jack openly: "Leaning over and giving him those little slaps whenever he teased her… Ma and her stupid risks, her black-lace bras".[51] The meal foreshadows the relationships between Jack and Bernice, but also Jack and Dolores when he tells her that her name translates to "Our Lady of Sorrow". Learning the etymological definition of her name, Dolores is struck down with the weight of its meaning as if in the act of "naming" her Jack also fixes her into a destiny (in another intertextual link to *Lolita*): "Suddenly, I *was* sad – overwhelmed with sadness".[52]

The association of Dolores fulfilling a familial destiny is reaffirmed in the first unsupervised interaction between Dolores and Jack. Dolores joins Jack on his porch one day, and Jack ends up discussing his problems at his job and he confides in Dolores about Rita's recent pregnancy and his reservations. During this chat, Jack begins to tickle Dolores's feet and eventually climbs on top of her to tickle her

[48] Ibid., 70.
[49] Ibid., 72-73.
[50] Ibid., 73.
[51] Ibid., 78.
[52] Ibid., 75.

stomach: “My head thumped back against the porch floor and I bucked and shoved, unable to breathe”.[53] After he lets her go Dolores is aware that something wrong happens in this moment and begins to cry “hard without control”: “My mind wouldn’t shut off … it must have been something else I had felt up there when he was on me, tickling me. His knee or elbow or something”.[54] In the evening Dolores has the opportunity to tell her mother after she comes back from an evening of bowling, but struggles to articulate her experience and refuses to return her mother’s affection. Dolores dismisses the experience as a product of her own imagination, calling herself a “a pig and an idiot”.[55] Still, the episode leaves Dolores recalling her Uncle Eddie, who drowns at age 19 in a flash flood: “Not being able to breathe up there on that porch – having no control of it: that was what his drowning must have felt like”.[56] Lamb suggests that with Jack, Dolores is close to fulfilling a family legacy of drowning as she finds herself in increasingly dangerous waters where she, too, may be similarly lost.

By depicting Dolores’s trauma as part of a longer pre-set pattern, Lamb situates Dolores’s abuse alongside a specific set of social circumstances that go beyond abuser and victim. Lamb rewrites the sensationalist circumstances around Lolita’s abuse in a more realist frame, rewriting the epic road journey and exotic abuser. The intertextual rewriting of *Lolita* in *She’s Come Undone* is more overt when Jack and Rita enter twelve-year-old Dolores’s world. Jack lives on the same property as Dolores, like Humbert with Lolita. Jack finds himself the object of Dolores’s mother’s attraction, and at some point, begins a relationship with her, like Humbert with Lolita’s mother Charlotte. Rita is also an intertextual assemblage because a

[53] Ibid., 89.
[54] Ibid., 89, 90.
[55] Ibid., 90.
[56] Ibid., 90.

character called Rita joins Humbert later to find Lolita when she escapes – Humbert describes her as "a constant companion"; "she would have given herself to any pathetic creature or fallacy".[57] Jack's veiled violation masquerading as play is reminiscent of the episode in *Lolita* when Humbert orgasms with Lolita sitting in his lap and claims that she is oblivious: "I felt proud of myself. I had stolen the honey of a spasm without impairing the morals of a minor".[58] *She's Come Undone* refutes the notion that sex or sexual release can be "stolen" unbeknownst to the victim. Most significantly, Jack is not depicted as an outsider like European pseudo-intellectual Humbert; in *She's Come Undone* Jack represents American popular culture of the 1960s with his rock and roll music, cut-off jeans and his job as a local radio DJ. Jack is not an exotic or menacing stranger like Humbert, but a church-going, disc-spinning American family man. By creating an all-American figure as Dolores's soon-to-be rapist, Lamb emphasises how abusers can be familiar and friendly.

The clearest realistic rewriting of *Lolita* is the car journeys that Jack takes Dolores on after school each day. The car in both novels is like a bubble in which the occupants are separated from the rest of the world and enables Humbert and Jack to recapture a sense of adolescence through their young companions. Robert Preston, in his thesis on time and space in *Lolita*, argues that Humbert's car functions as "his own solipsistic, self-deceiving and self-justifying 'bubble' of relative space-time", where space is subjected to different rules made by Humbert: "It is also a vehicle in which, for a brief time, he manages to co-opt Lolita into his perverse world, which is at odds with the shared morality of his fellow drivers".[59] In the car Jack, like Humbert, escapes the responsibilities of adulthood, where the outside rules do not seem to

[57] Ibid., 258.
[58] Nabokov, *Lolita* 62.
[59] Robert Preston, "It's All Relative: Time and Space in Nabokov's Lolita" (Dissertation, Halmstad University, 2013), 11-13.

apply. He spends most of the time bemoaning the commonplace frustrations of his professional and personal life to Dolores, treating her as a receptacle into which to pour his dissatisfactions. When she attempts to respond, or participate, he abuses her: "'And just who the hell do you think you are, Hot Pants?' he said, his nostrils flaring 'Your best policy might be to just shut the fuck up'".[60] In comparison to Humbert whose abuse of Lolita is glossed over with a poetic romanticism, Jack is depicted as crude, temperamentally changeable and petty.[61] This is in stark contrast to how Nabokov himself recognised how Lolita's abuse was glossed over because of its sentimentality in description: "an American critic suggested that *Lolita* was the record of my love affair with the romantic novel", however he also adds that "the substitution 'English language' for 'romantic novel' would make this elegant formula more correct".[62] In a similar pattern to Joan's role as listener, Dolores is repeatedly tasked with the emotional labour of making him feel better as a more mature consoler. Although the car facilitates and embodies an escape into their own worlds, Jack's and Humbert's excursions are radically different in one way. While Humbert travels across the US, taking Lolita on an extended road trip, Jack takes Dolores on short drives around their community through what he calls "mystery detours".[63] In *She's Come Undone* car journeys offer a regressive escape but they are also circuitous and repetitious, and are journeys Dolores feels she has to opt in to, again and again.

In *She's Come Undone* it is not physical distance or orphanhood that functions as the primary method of controlling Dolores, as it is for Lolita; it is instead a nexus of secrets. Jack controls Dolores by entrusting her with the news that his wife is pregnant and she reasons that he needs emotional support during this time. Dolores

[60] Lamb, *She's Come Undone,* 99.
[61] Nabokov, *Lolita*, 316.
[62] Nabokov, *Lolita*, 316.
[63] Lamb, *She's Come Undone,* 99.

fixates on Rita's pregnancy because once it is announced her uneasy intimacy with Jack will end and she will be released from her self-perceived obligation to keep his secret and to keep company with him: "For over a month, I had kept Jack's secret, waiting patiently for his and Rita's announcement".[64] She watches Rita's body, hoping it will announce the secret for them: "Whenever I saw Rita, I studied her face, her middle, even the way she looked and laughed, for visible signs. She gave none. She was as good at secrets as I was".[65] Dolores's scrutiny of Rita's body and her anticipation of the pregnancy announcement suggest her childlike excitement at the prospect of a baby, but also that the announcement would allow Dolores to secure Jack in the category of father figure, therefore neutralising his uneasy presence around her. Until it is announced both Dolores and Jack are suspended in a temporal flux of father/daughter and boyfriend/girlfriend dualities. He both is and is not a paternal figure. Their car rides both are and are not dangerous, until he rapes her.

While Lolita has no family to turn to in order to escape Humbert's control, Dolores is instead struck in a position of vulnerability and danger because of a communication breakdown in her home. Dolores attempts to signal her distress by binge-eating at home and in front of her family, which goes unnoticed:

> When I got back to Grandma's – usually in the middle of 'Edge of Night' – I was always hungry. I'd stuff down cookies, potato chips, overripe bananas – urgently, without noticing the tastes. Grandma sat with the shades drawn, mesmerized by her story, oblivious to my wild, risky rides.[66]

Although Dolores does not voice her predicament, the mouth is a zone where her discomfort is registered. The metaphor of bingeing as drowning is evoked in

[64] Ibid., 100-101.
[65] Ibid., 100-101.
[66] Ibid., 100.

Dolores's grooming as Dolores eats "urgently, without noticing the tastes". Her grandmother misses this signal of distress and is distracted by her television shows. During the section of the novel detailing Dolores's rides with Jack, her mother is only mentioned once, and that is to mediate the relationship between Dolores and her father. Dolores's excursions are an open secret that her family but also her community do not pick up on, or act on. Dolores and Jack are spotted repeatedly by neighbours: "Jack always let me off at Connie's Superette instead of at Grandma's. Inside, Connie watched me from behind the counter, her face impassive, her arms folded under her huge breasts".[67] Jack and Dolores's relationship is observed openly but there is no community outrage or legal action and Connie's crossed arms and unreadable face suggest silent disapproval but it is unclear whether this is of Jack or Dolores. In *Lolita*, Humbert exceptionalises the child as "the little deadly demon among the wholesome children; *she* stands unrecognized by them and unconscious herself of her fantastic power", but in *She's Come Undone* Jack is the dangerous figure in the community.[68] Lamb suggests how the community, and not only the family, becomes complicit in the open secret that is the strange relationship between 13-year-old Dolores and 25-year-old Jack.

Dolores's "risky rides" culminate in her rape by Jack by the side of a kennel for wild dogs. Lamb depicts Dolores's rape in brutalist realist description to represent the physicality and intimacy in the violation, as well as thwart the abstraction and romanticisation of abuse typical of Humbert's narration in *Lolita*. In *She's Come Undone*, Jack lures Dolores on a drive outside their normal circular routes and tells Dolores to listen for a waterfall nearby. Instead, he takes them to an animal sanctuary

[67] Ibid., 100.
[68] Nabokov, *Lolita,* 19.

for dogs who need to be euthanised. Alone by the pen where "angry barking filled up the air", [69] Jack pressures Dolores to kiss him and to look with him at a pornographic magazine. Dolores begins to cry and leaps out of the car to escape, realising "I might not *get* home".[70] Jack tackles Dolores to the ground and next to the angry barking dogs he shouts obscenities and accusations: "Little Miss Innocence … fucking fed up with your bullshit. Give you what you been looking for".[71] Dolores's violation by Jack includes brutally realist descriptions: "The sound of the barking dogs fell away so that all I could hear was his cursing and grunting, over and over, in rhythm with each thrust, each rupture".[72] Dolores dissociates from her body during the violence and she is left suspended in time and space as time elongates "over and over" and "the sound of the barking dogs [fall] away" in another return of drowning imagery.

Dolores's rape by Jack at the kennels is a rewriting of Humbert's fantasy of Hourglass Lake in *Lolita* where his lifelong preoccupation with nymphets begins. Hourglass beach is where thirteen-year-old Humbert and first love Annabel Leigh are interrupted in their attempt to make love and Humbert dreams of returning to fulfil this thwarted fantasy with Lolita. In *She's Come Undone* Dolores's rape rewrites Humbert's fantasy. For example, an intertextual comparison is clear in the reference to an idyllic waterscape. When they arrive, Jack tells Dolores to listen out for a waterfall but she can only hear the dogs: "I listened for that waterfall but heard, instead, the sound of barking dogs up in the trees. It got louder, came down to the ground".[73] Lamb suggests Jack's animalism by juxtaposing him with the angry dogs that surround them during the attack: "He was whimpering, catching his breath. When

[69] Lamb, *She's Come Undone,* 106.
[70] Ibid., 109.
[71] Ibid., 109.
[72] Ibid., 110.
[73] Ibid., 106.

he got up, he kicked me hard on the leg and walked back out in front. I heard him talking softly to the dogs, soothing them".[74] The rape is also in stark contrast to Humbert's highly stylised and largely abstract list that describes his first time abusing Lolita: "There would have been a fire opal dissolving within a ripple-ringed pool, a last throb, a last dab of color, stinging red, smearing pink, a sigh, a wincing child".[75] Humbert's recapturing of his experience of intercourse in this episode is a highly stylistic view of the act with the reality of the victim only returning at the final moment. In contrast Lamb depicts a brutal scene of rape and Dolores's disempowerment: "I tried to pull my head up, to punch and spit, but my fists wouldn't land. The drool fell back against my chin".[76] Lamb evokes the metaphors and symbols through which Humbert idealises Lolita's abuse but reimagines them to emphasise the fear and pain from the perspective of the victim. On the ride home this reoccurs when Jack reminds Dolores of the gun he has in the car. In *Lolita* Humbert carries a gun to kill his double and nemesis Clare Quilty the man with whom Lolita escapes, but in *She's Come Undone* Jack threatens Dolores directly by placing the responsibility for his life, and the life of his wife and unborn child, in her hands. Whereas Humbert's gun is associated with an act, in his mind, that is, of heroism by avenging Lolita's abuse at the hands of another, Jack's act is designed to further terrorise Dolores and to make her feel responsible for the lives of his innocent family.

In Nabokov's novel Humbert marries Lolita's mother Charlotte in order to get closer to her child, and in this dark parody of a nuclear family Humbert becomes Lolita's legal guardian following her death. Humbert's abuse of Lolita begins after Charlotte's death. In *She's Come Undone* Bernice is having an affair with Jack during

[74] Ibid., 110.
[75] Nabokov, *Lolita,* 134-135.
[76] Lamb, *She's Come Undone,* 109.

Dolores's rides with him, which Dolores is aware of but represses this knowledge until adulthood. Unlike Lolita, Dolores's grooming and rape happen within view of her mother and grandmother, as suggested when Dolores comes home after the attack: "I walked past Grandma and up the stairs. My blouse had a dirt smudge on the sleeve. My underpants and legs were filthy with blood and him".[77] Although they are present they are not able to pick up on Dolores's the threat and abuse before or after the rape. By choosing to depict simultaneous relationships between mother, daughter and abuser, rather than sequential like those in *Lolita*, Lamb sets up the novel's central conflict to focus on the consequential guilt, blame, and responsibility following traumatic events.

In the immediate aftermath of the attack, Dolores seeks comfort through eating which intensifies the relationship between consumption and pain. She reveals the attack two weeks after the event to a neighbour she trusts, Roberta, a tattooist who lives across from her family who comforts her with tea, surfacing the link between consumption and emotional need. Together they tell her mother and her mother's regret breeds a "ritualized … weekly array" of "victim's consolation prizes" that include food, paperback books and a television in her bedroom.[78] As Dolores grows to the weight of 260 pounds, Lamb rewrites the waiflike and idealised adolescent body of the nymphet into the form of the grotesque, out-of-control fat body. The fragility and gracefulness of Nabokov's description of Lolita has led Diana Butler, in *Lolita Lepidoptera* to argue that Lolita shares many of her characteristics with butterflies and might be understood as a butterfly in girl's clothing.[79] In *Lady Oracle* the butterfly costume is coveted by Joan as a symbol of femininity and acceptance, but in

[77] Ibid., 111.
[78] Ibid., 118.
[79] Diana Butler, *Lolita Lepidoptera* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1960).

She's Come Undone it represents the fetishisation and sexualisation of the vulnerability and fragility of young girls. In contrast to Berlant's argument that recovery fiction and culture is "juxtapolitical" in that it lacks political analysis, I argue that Lamb's intertextual rewriting of Lolita in Dolores and in her fat adolescence is evokes and critiques a politics of representation around abuse. Whereas consumables are a form of control and abuse of Lolita by Humbert and the mother-daughter relationship is side-lined, Dolores's body in the aftermath of the rape becomes a living text of her trauma and Bernice's guilt.[80] Dolores's body testifies to the brutality and impact of the event, as well as a need to contend with and represent abuse differently in fiction.

A key way the novel reflects a broader social critique is how Dolores's is situated against a social backdrop that both enables abuse and impedes healing. Dolores's body grows partly because of the silence that surrounds her rape in her family and community. The rape is subsumed into euphemistic terms such as "the business with him", and Dolores is only offered nonverbal forms of comfort: Grandma leaves her a set of rosary beads, and her mother invests in gifts.[81] In *She's Come Undone* Lamb suggests how sexual trauma is often rendered unspeakable by social, interpersonal and historical contexts rather than because it defies language itself.[82] In Caruth's theorisation of trauma in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* the traumatic event is not fully experienced in the moment thereby rendering it beyond understanding or comprehension. The event is beyond articulation: it defies language.

[80] In *Lolita*, Humbert's narration reduces the relationship between Charlotte and Dolores Haze to a minor relationship that is marked by jealousy. However, when Humbert eventually tells Lolita her mother has died she spends nights crying herself to sleep: "At the hotel we had separate rooms, but in the middle of the night she came sobbing into mine, and we made it up very gently. You see, she had absolutely nowhere else to go", 142.
[81] Lamb, *She's Come Undone,* 117.
[82] Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Johns Hopkins University, 1995).

Lamb emphasises that Dolores's trauma is socially unspeakable as much as it is ontologically inaccessible: in Dolores's home the crime is unspoken by her family. Their silence resonates with Jenny Edkins' warning, in a very different context of the trauma experienced in the terrorist attack of September 11th, 2001, that the incommunicability of trauma can translate into a reason to disengage culturally and critically with traumatic histories: "[w]hat survivors have witnessed has long been recognised as 'unimaginable' and 'unspeakable', although these epithets have often served as an excuse for neither imagining it nor speaking about it".[83] While Edkin's criticism is about a large-scale, public event, in Lamb's novel it is clear that this cultural unspeakability travels down to more personal, less public traumatic events. What's more, the silence around Dolores's abuse contributes to an internationalisation of guilt and shame in the event. Bernice lets Jack and Rita escape and she also tells the police that Dolores needs to forget the event: "that kid up there is thirteen years old. She just needs to pretend it never happened".[84] In this episode a personal reluctance to discuss the event translates into a systemic failure of the family and of the legal system, which compounds Dolores's trauma and makes her body hold in all this pain.

Dolores's fatness is tied to a misplaced understanding of herself as a complicit agent in her abuse. Jack spins a narrative of complicity that thirteen-year-old Dolores internalises when Jack's wife Rita miscarries soon after he commits the rape. Dolores believes that her mother "saw me not for what I was – an accomplice in the baby's murder – but as Jack's innocent victim":

[83] Jenny Edkins, "The Absence of Meaning: Trauma and the Events of 11 September" *Info Interventions* (2001), 2. Also see Jenny Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).
[84] Lamb, *She's Come Undone,* 117.

> I sat up and told myself to admit it: we had killed that baby, Jack and me – destroyed it with the filthy thing we did. I wasn't Little Miss Innocence. Hadn't I gotten into the car with him all those afternoons? Touched myself thinking about him that time? Baby-killer Dolores, guilty as sin.[85]

Dolores internalises blame for her assault and testifies to her "sin" by making it visible on the body. Dolores's internalisation of blame is intertwined with her Catholic upbringing. Dolores believes God "killed" Rita's baby "because of the chances I'd taken, the things I'd let myself think, do, have done. [86] The allusion to religiosity following the rape also suggests how social and cultural institutions have historically conspired to make girls believe they should feel guilt or complicity in rape, and, in this case, the death of unborn infants.[87] In its likeness to a pregnant body, Dolores's body mirrors Rita's pregnant body, and the secret that kept Dolores and Jack tied together before her rape. Dolores's fat body represents a grotesque sense of loss or absence made present and is a parody of Rita's reproductive body – growing yet empty, with the seed that was lost in Rita replanted in Dolores as an unproductive hunger.

Dolores compulsively devours not only her own pain but also the pain of her mother. The repressed memory that Dolores recovers in therapy is not the traumatic event of rape, but the memory that her mother was having an affair with her rapist. Instead of discussing this event with Dolores, Bernice over-nurtures her daughter which has the effect of transporting Dolores back to an earlier stage of the mother-daughter connection. The home becomes a substitute womb that Dolores loathes to leave and a space where all of her needs are met through Bernice's compulsive feeding. Their bodies are connected symbiotically: their bodies seep, spill and leak

[85] Ibid., 112.
[86] Ibid., 112.
[87] Ibid., 112.

with either flesh, in Dolores's case, or tears in Bernice's. This vicious co-dependency is Dolores's way of unconsciously punishing her mother for the affair, making her mother complicit in their mutual destruction.

While Bernice initially fulfils an ambivalent mother figure similar to the mother in *Lady Oracle*, who first distances then smothers the child, Bernice belatedly recognises her complicity in the disastrous cycle the family is caught in and attempts to derail the pattern. She expresses fears that her daughter, by retreating into the home, is on the way to fulfilling a toxic matrilineal legacy that will see her condemned, like herself, to re-live history in the "house of repression": "'I'm afraid, too,' she said. 'Afraid the way you're going, you'll end up like me. … I'm thirty-eight years old and still living with my mother. I've wanted to get away from that woman all my life'".[88] Bernice pushes Dolores to finish school and apply to college, writing the college application letter herself when Dolores refuses. She refuses to be complicit in Dolores's escapism and self-destruction by removing the sources of comfort she previously supplied. Bernice refuses to capitulate to Dolores's desires for paperback fiction either, also which, once withheld, Dolores describes as "starving" her.[89] She literally cuts off Dolores's access to television by severing the wire. In comparison to Joan's mother Frances in *Lady Oracle* who stabs Joan in the arm with a knife in a largely unconscious moment of fear when Joan becomes more independent and loses weight, Bernice's severing the wire is to ensure Dolores has a future and does not repeat toxic matrilineal cycles. While Frances symbolically severs her remaining relationship with her daughter, Bernice's act of severing the wire (a symbolic severing

[88] Lamb, *She's Come Undone,* 133.
[89] Ibid., 122.

of the umbilical cord) is her strongest and most triumphant maternal moment in provoking individuation and maturation.

Dolores is unable to imagine the future Bernice pushes for and remains stuck in a dependency because she and the family have not addressed her history of violence. Drowning imagery infects all aspects of her life relating to leaving home, reflecting how she can only imagine an existence in her current state. For instance, when Dolores acquiesces to go to the Doctor for a physical examination for college to get her television fixed, the doctor's office is associated with submerged water and the doctor with a gatekeeper: "Through a pane of ripply blue glass, I watched him walk back and forth behind the door that led to the inner office, like a person underwater".[90] With the doctor's brash statement "You're too goddamned fat"[91] ringing in Dolores's ears, she binges to drown out his voice: "I started with Mallomarsh, stuffing them whole into my mouth. That old man's voice wouldn't go away".[92] Dolores's consumption of food both metaphorically or literally takes the place of major moments in her life. For instance, Dolores voluntarily misses her graduation and instead goes on a binge of a $100 large roast beef. Dolores's binge is also threaded through with drowning imagery and shows how moving forward in her life is an anxiety-filled prospect: "I hacked the beef into several odd-sized pieces, using Grandma's most brutal knife. The deeper I cut, the more purply raw the meat became. I gagged and choked, swallowing whole the cool, rubbery hunks I couldn't manage to chew through".[93] Dolores follows up her act of self-destruction by repeating the process of healing after the rape: "I made the bathwater as hot as it would go – as scalding as the night he'd done it to me – and eased myself in. Not that

[90] Ibid., 123-124.
[91] Ibid., 124.
[92] Ibid., 126.
[93] Ibid., 129-130.

it worked. Not that it ever washed away".[94] Dolores's difficulty in moving forward or imagining a life outside of her mother's care is connected to her self-destructive cycle and unresolved trauma from the rape.

Dolores's difficulty in moving forward is due to the weight that her mother's secret has on their relationship. Dolores interprets Bernice's commitment to her future as a desire to ease herself of the burden of Dolores: "She couldn't wait to get rid of me – only she wasn't going to".[95] The fat body of Dolores, like Victoria's in *Body of Knowledge*, is an intertextual fragment of a communal and co-written history that has to be read before either character can move forward. Monteith writes that, as the stories that Viola inscribes on her body are combined with other stories, "these are palimpsests, as is Victoria herself – the living Ransom text – and she must learn to read herself to write herself out of the hold that the burden of history has had on her person". [96] Dolores's and Victoria's fat adolescent girl bodies represent an overabundance of memory but also reveal the urgency of facing it for both themselves and their families. The fat adolescent differs from the extremely fat woman in film and television in the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century in this respect. In an analysis of "very fat" women characters in the drama *What's Eating Gilbert Grape?* and the animated family horror film *Monster House,* Caroline Narby and Katherine Phelps note that the fat woman "has *negative* social value" in these representations.[97] They argue that the fat woman's death is necessary to free both their families and the community at large: "The protagonists are 'freed' by the death of a very fat woman and the destruction of the house with which she had become

[94] Ibid., 130.
[95] Ibid., 120.
[96] Monteith, *Advancing Sisterhood* (University of Georgia Press, 2000), 156.
[97] Caroline Narby and Katherine Phelps, "As Big as a House: Representations of the Extremely Fat Woman and the Home" *Fat Studies* 2.2 (2013), 156.

merged". [98] In comparison the fat adolescent girls in *Body of Knowledge* and *She's Come Undone* must excavate their psychological and physical wounding to rescue both themselves and symbolically, their families. They demand, in their very persons, the excavation of their families' painful histories that have gone unspoken for so long.

Dolores's exit from the home and entry into the world begins when she is shocked out of lassitude by the death of her mother, when Dolores is 17. Prior to her mother's death, Dolores wears down her mother's wish for her to go to college in a grim victory over her mother but after her death Dolores is left battling overwhelming grief and guilt for her insulting treatment of Bernice. Dolores's identity has been fused to Bernice's in a toxic but nevertheless fundamental dependency which she now must let go: "I sat down at Ma's desk, not sure of what it was I wanted to write. A suicide letter? Who would I write it to, other than Ma?"[99] Having lost her mother, a double of herself and audience for her performance, Dolores is thrust into a new set of circumstances where she creates and finds doubles of herself that reflect new possible future paths. Lamb does not depict Dolores as condemned to live out a life as a figuration of her and her family's history and pain.

The death of Bernice and Dolores's decision to go to college resonates with and rewrites several tragic intertextual plot points around motherhood and futurity in *Lolita*. In Nabokov's novel, Lolita's mother Charlotte is killed in a tragic car accident immediately after discovering Humbert's true intentions towards her daughter. She dies attempting to post a letter that will take Lolita far away from Humbert, thereby securing a different future for her daughter. In Lamb's novel, even though Bernice also dies early and in a tragic car accident, she succeeds in posting the college

[98] Ibid.,155.
[99] Lamb, *She's Come Undone,* 143.

application letter which offers Dolores a future outside of the "house of repression".[100] In both novels, letter-writing is an important maternal act according to which the two Dolores's lives separate in very different directions that either save or condemn them. Dolores loses her mother at age 17, which is the age that Lolita dies delivering a stillborn son. While in *Lolita* this is the point of the story when all futurity is lost for Lolita and her family, in Lamb's novel this is the age that Dolores re-engages with a possible futurity to honour her mother's memory. In both novels, all three mothers die (Bernice, Charlotte, Lolita), but in *She's Come Undone* Bernice's death pushes Dolores to value her own life and in doing so break the matrilineal pattern.

Dolores's first act of engaging with a new life is through letter-writing to her future roommate Kippy. To blend in and survive this new environment, Dolores creates a fictional persona that rewrites her past. In her letters, Dolores lives through her mother's fantasy for her to live like the daughter of Richard Nixon, complete with boyfriend, hobbies and still-married, loving parents. Dolores hopes her stories will be enough to offset the reality of her life with roommate Kippy, to compensate for the lies: "Maybe I'd somehow manage to slip into this created girl's life. Or maybe Kippy would love me for my letters, forgive the rest".[101] College as a space where Dolores can reinvent herself and find a space to move on from her troubles is reinforced when she arrives early and makes a friend in another fat woman, the dormitory janitor called Dottie. They spend the night dancing to Aretha Franklin's song "Respect" and eating cake. Yet Dolores's friendship with Dottie, a person who is on the sidelines of the college experience and its social norms as a fat woman, reveals that Dolores might

[100] Ibid., 133.
[101] Ibid., 147.

find the acceptance and community she needs at college, but it might not appear in the form that she might expect.

When Kippy arrives, she rejects Dolores for her appearance and her lies – "I didn't write a *thing* to you, okay? I wrote to someone else"[102] – and in return Dolores takes on a maternal position to create a space for herself in the college dorm. Dolores uses *Romeo and Juliet*'s Old Nurse as a "role model" for this position who "spoke her piece but knew her place".[103] Old Nurse is a harbourer of secrets, acting as primary go-between for Juliet and Romeo. In a misguided attempt to connect with someone, Dolores intercepts Kippy's letters with her boyfriend, Dante (in a parody of Juliet's faithful nurse): "I wasn't actually *stealing* the letters, I told myself. I was withholding them for the good of someone whose suffering I felt I understood".[104] Yet she finds herself consuming Dante's most intimate thoughts about religion, sex and paternal destiny without his knowledge and her need for a friend remains unmet.

Dolores begins to craft a path for herself by hiding her true self and feelings, but this comes to a premature end when Dolores is the subject of a humiliating joke that triggers her memory of the rape. At a college party Dolores is grabbed by the wrists and hips by Kippy's new jock boyfriend Eric who begins to perform an exaggeratedly sexualised dance with her for the entertainment of others. The other students begin singing Aretha Franklin's song "Respect" during the ordeal. Dolores's previous happy memory of what college could be for her is soured and ruined. College as a pathway to futurity, progression and self-actualisation proves instead to be a space of belittlement, self-denial and reinforcement of Dolores's social status as outcast. As Dolores struggles to escape, and Eric and the other students close in on

[102] Ibid., 197.
[103] Ibid., 199.
[104] Ibid., 119.

her, the experience triggers Dolores's memories of the abuse she has tried to put behind her: "He [Eric] latched his legs around my leg and rocked up and down. The others barked like dogs". The others mimic Jack's words during the assault, "Give her what she wants!"[105] Dolores manages to escape but later she discovers that her possessions have been destroyed, including a beloved painting from her mother. College offers no protection from the same violence that exists outside of it, and only threatens the aspects of her history that she holds dear. A grieving Dolores cuts a section from the damaged painting to keep with her always.

To escape, Dolores calls Dottie seeking refuge. Dottie is another double of Lolita, as suggested in the similarity of her name to "Dolly", the name Lolita eventually chooses for herself in marriage. Like the two Doloreses, Dottie has a history of sexual exploitation, describing how she used to have sex with a group of older boys to let her play football with them: "Used to stand around and watch each other. Tell jokes about me right in the middle of it".[106] Like Nabokov's Lolita, Dottie also has a baby in her teenage years, a boy with various medical issues who has since died. Dottie and Dolores are the characters through whom Lamb writes beyond the ending of Lolita-the-girl, imagining in these characters loose alternative futures. After these experiences Dottie does not settle into a domestic heteronormative life of marriage like Lolita but pursues same-sex relationships. In particular, Dottie desires to have a romantic relationship with Dolores because they are "just alike": "Two fatties like us. What's the difference? … Two big fat mamas. Nobody cares".[107] She offers Dolores a possible future by withdrawing from a harsh world and from relationships with men into a private world of their own. She spends the night with Dottie, which is

[105] Ibid., 220.
[106] Ibid., 229.
[107] Ibid., 224, 227.

Dolores's first pleasurable if ambivalent sexual experience with another person: "She was right. We didn't matter. People hated us anyway. I kissed her back. Kissed her loneliness and my own fear".[108] In confusion about her sexuality and her future, Dolores feels like she has been made over in another's image and against her own volition: "She'd tricked me. Now I was what she was".[109] As her mental health spirals, Dolores thinks about committing suicide in Dottie's home, but kills Dottie's fish instead, an act that symbolises the severing of her identification with her double.

In order to move forward, Dolores embarks on a taxi ride to Cape Cod to escape from her situation and "rid the world of [the] Fat Girl Monster".[110] She takes a cab with the Portuguese man called Domingos who lives across from Dottie and who drove Dolores to her college residence on her first day. For the first time since Dolores enrolled in college, as the two travel, they discuss the death of her mother and her uncle. By depicting a fleeting yet intimate and honest connection with the taxi driver who exists on the edge of important literal but also figurative journeys in Dolores's life, Lamb stresses the significance of these small, everyday coincidences that can form powerful, if fleeting, connections – a theme examined in more depth in my analysis of Susan Stinson's *Venus of Chalk* (2004) in Chapter 4. Dolores decides to go to Wellfleet, where eleven humpback whales have died for reasons that confound scientific explanation. Once they arrive, Dolores and Domingos find a whale that has recently washed up and has not yet died. The suffering and fatalism of the whale's circumstance resonates with her own. Dolores sympathises with the whale as a creature who has found itself in a perilous position that it is unable to get out of, but also that spectators watch and do nothing: "They could at least try. Instead of

[108] Ibid., 227.
[109] Ibid., 229.
[110] Ibid., 233.

everybody standing around gawking".[111] The whale's fate as somehow intertwined with Dolores's is reinforced by how Domingos connects the death of the whales to the moon landing, which is the weekend of her mother's death: "'He screwed everything up, that guy – even those poor whales".[112] That weekend has also led Dolores to this point, but unlike the whales she has a choice about whether to succumb to it, or not.

The whale reflects Dolores, or more specifically Dolores's tendency to define herself and her future in relation to others. The next morning, Dolores walks to the beach where the whale is beginning to rot. Dolores watches as a succession of spectators slice off souvenirs of the dead creature: "People came and went like that, like Ma's wake. I outlasted all of them – a chaperone for her corpse".[113] She submerges herself next to the whale, kissing its coarse and salty skin, and stares into one of its eyes: "The eye stared back at me without seeing. The iris was milky and blank, blurred by seawater. A cataract eye, an eye full of death. I reached out and touched the skin just below it, then reached the hard globe itself".[114] Dolores's encounter with the whale represents a monstrous depiction of herself: "This was how I could die. This was where… I drank seawater in thick gulps and swallows, glimpsing the death eye in the middle of my battle".[115] Whales are symbolically significant, as Sharon Monteith notes in relation to a different fat girl character, Victoria Ransom in *Body of Knowledge*. Victoria also sees herself as a "Great White Whale," drawing on the image of the white whale in *Moby Dick*, a creature onto which Ahab projects his fears and desires for revenge and renewal.[116] For Dolores, she refuses to succumb to the doom embodied in the whale and eventually chooses

[111] Ibid., 243.
[112] Ibid., 250.
[113] Ibid., 251.
[114] Ibid., 251.
[115] Ibid., 251.
[116] Sharon Monteith, *Advancing Sisterhood* (University of Georgia Press, 2000), 155.

life. The suicide attempt breaks two narrative patterns. Firstly, the attempt recalls Lolita's tragically short lifespan, where she dies in the process of giving birth and at the beginning of her new life with her own family. In contrast, Lamb's Dolores claims a second chance on the cusp of adulthood, surviving beyond the ending of *Lolita*: "I had reached some kind of end. But hadn't reached it".[117] Dolores's decision to choose life also represents the thwarting of the Price family legacy, represented by drowning, in the literal and metaphorical sense of drowning in the water but also by being drowned in sorrow. In the water Dolores's choice suggests a path towards painful self-discovery.

Following her suicide attempt, Dolores is found by a patrolman and begins to undo her dependency on others to define herself. Prior to her confrontation with the whale, Dolores calls her mother's friend Geneva Sweet who is the only person she knows who she "hadn't failed"; it is her mother's childhood friend who gets Dolores the help she needs by paying for a mental health facility: "Grandma had at first objected to the financial arrangement – this fairy-godmother approach to making me sane – but Geneva had sat down in Grandma's parlor and pointed out that she and Ivy were 'comfortable,' that God had never given her a daughter of her own to provide for, that making me well was something she wanted to do for Bernice, God rest her soul".[118] Geneva's financial support is crucial to Dolores's recovery and recalls Joan's weight loss episode in *Lady Oracle* where Aunt Lou incentivises Joan with a financial reward to lose weight and leave the family home. Dolores, like Joan, needs a secondary mother-like figure to help her on her journey to maturity and recovery; however, while Joan idealises her Aunt Lou, in *She's Come Undone* Geneva is unable to be a maternal replacement for Dolores: "Geneva hugged me at the end of each

[117] Ibid., 251.
[118] Lamb, *She's Come Undone*, 257.

visit, a mannequin's embrace that let you know she was nobody's mother".[119] Joan describes her weight loss and exit from her mother's grasp as a fateful and magical transformation rather than a result of her own work, but Dolores recognises her decision to leave the sea that day as her own: "I let her [Geneva] believe she'd rescued me – kept it a secret that I'd tried death before that patrolman ever arrived, that I'd swum down and met that whale eye to eye".[120] Geneva is the first of several figures who will try to occupy a maternal position for Dolores, but Dolores begins her journey away from her past by claiming her wins and losses as her own. Although Dolores is faced with several versions of herself and replacements for her mother after her death, when Dolores has the opportunity to infuse Geneva with this symbolic significance she ultimately rejects her. In the sea Dolores faces and buries the part of her that needs a symbolic replacement of this relationship or mirror image of herself.

The third and final section of the novel details Dolores's journey from suffering to physical and psychological recovery after the suicide attempt. In this section Lamb evokes metaphors of magic and time travel for Dolores's therapy and healing, which I read as another intertextual allusion to Nabokov's novel. In *Lolita* Humbert defines a nymphet as a magical creature that has a certain "fantastic power" that she uses but is at the same time unconscious of using:

> Now I wish to introduce the following idea. Between the age limits of nine and fourteen there occurs maidens who, to certain bewitched travellers, twice or many times older than they, reveal their true nature which is not human, but nymphic (that is demoniac); and these chosen creatures I propose to designate as 'nymphets.'[121]

[119] Ibid., 258.
[120] Ibid., 257.
[121] Nabokov, *Lolita,* 17.

Humbert describes the connection between those who can recognise and appreciate nymphets in magical terms also. These men are "bewitched travellers" who travel to this "enchanted island", but also "conjurer[s]" who perform magic tricks on the girls themselves – namely, in "conjuring" the nymphet into existence. Humbert defines his "nympholeptcy" as an obsession with a particular phase of girlhood in spatialised terms: "I would have the reader see 'nine' and 'fourteen' as the boundaries – the mirror beaches and rosy rocks – of an enchanted island haunted by those nymphets of mine and surrounded by a vast, misty sea".[122] Lamb evokes the rhetoric of magic and mysticism that Nabokov creates for abusive desire and adapts this metaphor into a symbol of Dolores's uncertainty and suspicion, but also hopefulness, around healing and recovery. Dolores describes her recovery in terms of "rewinding time" through therapy and introspection, but also love. Yet these relationships and institutions nourish her but sometimes curtail and abuse her. In doing so Lamb reimagines time travel as a metaphor for Dolores's non-linear, uneven, and ongoing recovery from trauma.

Dolores's journey to recovery is staggered and not immediate. When she is treated at Gracewood mental institute, she is kept sedated for four years: "I kept no diaries during that time to chronicle the thousands of hours I must have lost to tranquilizers and television, so my recollections are vivid but gap-ridden".[123] Dolores's treatment only contains her trauma in the most superficial of ways. The possibility of recovery is only established when she is treated by Dr. Shaw, a new "maverick" psychotherapist.[124] Lamb's re-appropriation of Nabokov's language of magic for a language of recovery and psychoanalytic method is seen in Lamb's

[122] Ibid., 16.
[123] Lamb *She's Come Undone,* 255.
[124] Ibid., 259.

description of Dr. Shaw as a magician: "I remember him as both my fool and my magician: the gullible idiot from whom I withheld information, the powerful wizard who evoked secrets I'd kept even from myself".[125] The term magician is a word that Humbert uses to describe himself, but between Dolores and Dr. Shaw Lamb evokes it to frame this relationship as defined by power: doctor/patient, man/woman, and (symbolically) adult/child or parent/child. The powerful position Dr. Shaw occupies makes it difficult for Dolores to categorise him: "I'll admit it: when I recall Dr. Shaw it's with an impish memory that may or may not be playing tricks … More often than not, Dr. Shaw's voice is the voice of the corpse".[126] The "corpse" refers to the whale and to her image of her former self, but also suggests Dr. Shaw is not of this world: he re-animates the dead through hypnotic incantations and in ambiguous ways: "The corpse is either benign or dangerous. It has the gift of speech".[127] This reference to Shaw as a corpse suggests how the relationship between Dolores and Dr. Shaw is defined by ambiguity and power play. Dolores claims from a position of recovery that, "Like the whale herself, my memories of Gracewood have become for me a corpse I'm obliged to carry. Sometimes it occupies the passenger's seat in the car during long, quiet drives; sometimes it lies beside me in bed, on nights when I can't sleep, or on nights when I can".[128] Dolores's recollection of her recovery and Dr. Shaw is, like her trauma, is fraught and also marked by unstable, mixed emotions.

Lamb evokes magical imagery to depict Dolores's uncertainty and suspicion, yet also hopefulness, around healers and recovery. In particular, magical imagery aligns healers as either a reflection of Humbert as another abusive character, or a rewriting of him entirely. This ambiguity is clear in how Dr. Shaw, like Humbert,

[125] Ibid., 258.
[126] Ibid., 255-256.
[127] Ibid., 255-256.
[128] Ibid., 255-256.

"conjures" the vision of a different, "beautiful" Dolores in his mind.[129] Dr. Shaw sees this visualisation of herself as a "beautiful person" as the key to Dolores's physical and psychological wellness, but she begins her journey to wellness by using his tools in an entirely new way. Instead of envisioning her "better" self, to lose weight, Dolores envisions mold creeping along her food.[130] Like Lolita with Humbert, Dolores exists on the periphery of Dr. Shaw's fictionalised image of her, playing the same game but by her own rules. When Dr. Shaw asks her if she knows why she is slimming she does not share her method: "It was better to let *him* tell you what you were thinking, rather than wasting time having him correct you".[131] Instead of depicting the therapist as a respected and knowledgeable authority, Dolores manipulates and indulges Dr. Shaw's thinly veiled attempts to guide Dolores to oedipal explanations. In one particularly important episode when they are discussing her attempted suicide, Dolores realises he is pushing her towards discussing her mother: "I knew what he was after: he wanted me to lift up the rotting whale to see if Ma was under it. He was always looking for Ma".[132] Dolores misjudges his cues and unintentionally gives him the Freudian return to the womb interpretation he is looking for: "I miscalculated – thought he wanted sunlight and breakthroughs".[133] Dr. Shaw uses Dolores's "breakthrough" as an opportunity to put into practice an experimental psychotherapeutic method that will be largely successful for her, but also extends these uncertain power dynamics even further.

The association of healing with magic, and Dr. Shaw as an inversion of Humbert, is developed in the concept of therapeutic "reparenting". Dr. Shaw attempts

[129] Ibid., 259.
[130] Ibid., 260.
[131] Ibid., 259.
[132] Ibid., 263.
[133] Ibid., 264.

to "reparent" Dolores through her formative childhood years by mimicking a pseudo-parent-child dynamic. In the institute's pool, Dr. Shaw hypnotises Dolores in the water (or womb) and takes on the role of her surrogate mother to re-experience her childhood with her. To return to Gibbs, Lamb extends the figurative and bodily "literality" of trauma in Dolores's eating and fat body to Dolores's recovery in her pre-oedipal performance with her therapist. Lamb represents recovery with as much creative symbolism as he does trauma. While Nabokov makes the reader complicit in Lolita's abuse through the novel's textual playfulness and aesthetic form, Lamb attempts to create narrative pleasure as much on Dolores's recovery as in her traumatic spiral.

Lamb creates a parody of the maternal relationship in Dolores and Dr. Shaw, a man she is initially attracted to and fantasises about while masturbating: "What I was thinking about was whether or not his being my mother was going to wreck my nightly friction ritual".[134] Dolores can only engage sincerely with reparenting therapy after Dr. Shaw accidently electrocutes himself at the side of the pool, and Dolores brings him back to consciousness. The electrocution is the moment in which Dolores is "reborn" as the daughter of Dr. Shaw as she feels responsible for the death of not one but, almost, two mothers: "We sat holding hands, me wet and naked still. Shivering passed between us like electricity".[135] In contrast to Nabokov's novel, this performance of oedipal relations rewrites in positive terms Humbert's adoption of a pseudo-child therapist role to control Lolita.[136] In his analysis of Humbert's

[134] Ibid., 269.
[135] Ibid., 270.
[136] Textual evidence of this includes: "I discovered there was an endless source of robust enjoyment in trifling with psychiatrists: cunningly leading them on; never letting them see that you know all the tricks of the trade; inventing for them elaborate dreams, pure classics in style (which make them, the dream-extortionists, dream and wake up shrieking); teasing them with fake 'primal scenes'; and never allowing them the slightest glimpse of one's real sexual predicament. By bribing a nurse I won access to some files and discovered, with glee, cards calling me 'potentially homosexual' and 'totally

"camouflage" identities, Adam Piette discusses how Humbert's psychic manipulation is another insidious method through which he enacts violence on Lolita: "He will impose fake primal scenes on her with his 'parody of incest'. He will invent nightmarish dreams for her, extort her imagination, cunningly lead her on into a web of camouflaged identities, make her, his 'patient', believe she has witnessed her own conception as nymphet".[137] While Humbert's enactment of oedipal relations is another weapon through which to heighten his arousal and traumatise Lolita, in *She's Come Undone* this performance does ultimately work as a method of healing. Dolores claims the electrocution "made him, truly, my mother" and comes around to seeing Dr. Shaw as a positive parental figure: "Dr. Shaw was the first parent who hadn't left me. Or, rather, the first parent who had left me and then come back from the dead".[138]

Dolores's period of reparenting is depicted as a parallel time frame, in another reference to Humbert and Lolita. On entering the pool, Dolores and Dr. Shaw become time travellers who travel back to Dolores's childhood: "From the edge of the pool, he guided me – swimsuited, after that first session – through my prenatal and toddler stages".[139] During therapy, Dolores lives a split existence as both a child and a woman: before and after the rape; before and after her mother's death. She has a double age, her real "chronological" age and her "pool" age. Returning to a moment before loss in *She's Come Undone* draws on the same imagery in *Lolita* between abuser and abused child. The pool is doubled with the car, with both spaces representing regression to a space and time where rules and external logic are suspended. The relationship between Dolores and her therapist is also depicted as

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impotent'", Nabokov, *Lolita,* 34-35; "The child therapist in me (a fake, as most of them are – but no matter) regurgitated neo-Freudian hash and conjured up a dreaming and exaggerating Dolly in the 'latency' period of girlhood", 124.

[137] Adam Piette, *The Literary Cold War, 1945 to Vietnam* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 84.

[138] Lamb, *She's Come Undone*, 271.

[139] Ibid., 271.

culturally taboo when Dolores goes shopping for a birthday present to celebrate her tenth birthday in "pool years". Taking her Etch-A-Sketch to the checkout, Dolores's relationship with Dr. Shaw is misconstrued as a romance by the shop assistant to which Dolores replies: "'Oh, he's not my boyfriend . . . He's my mother.' Her hand tightened into a fist around the money".[140] The radical therapy is a closed off world like the "enchanted island" in Humbert's imagination, but this time it is a positive space for Dolores's recovery.

Dr. Shaw's radical methods help Dolores to purge the unspoken words about her rape and her mother's death she has stored inside from her tumultuous childhood. When Dolores is getting interested in politics (Watergate specifically) and the outside world as a 21 year old, Dr. Shaw wants to bring her back to insular topics like herself and her coming to sexuality in her preadolescent years: "I'd start each hour with rambling speeches about Nixon and Haldeman and liars in general and he'd guide me back to the subjects of menstruation and masturbation and what I was feeling sexually that summer nine years earlier, when Jack and Rita moved into Grandma's third-floor apartment".[141] Dr. Shaw interprets Dolores's preoccupation with liars as sublimated anger at her mother, a topic that Dolores had forbidden. At Dr. Shaw's provocation Dolores begins to open up about her mother, calling her a "whore" and saying for the first time that her mother had an affair with Jack: "My arms, my fists, flew with anger let finally free. I lashed out at her, walloped her, smashed at her with the truth".[142] The biggest revelation is depicted as the recovery of the memory that her mother had an affair with her rapist. Dolores describes this unburdening in terms of emptiness:

'When I came in here, I was this fat … And now-'

[140] Ibid., 272.
[141] Ibid., 273.
[142] Ibid., 277.

> ‘And now what, Dolores?’
>
> ‘I’m empty.’
>
> He hugged me, cradling my head. ‘You’re triumphant!’ he said.[143]

Dr. Shaw adopts a language of triumphalism, but Dolores finds that speaking one’s truth does not quite yield the dramatic change he extols. Although Dolores makes this stride toward recovery, this episode also reinforces the inadequacy of psychotherapeutic discourse. On another occasion, she is depicted mimicking a positive outlook for Dr. Shaw’s benefit. When he asks, “‘You’ve made some remarkable strides thus far … How does that make you feel?’”, she confesses to herself: “My answer, a smile, had nothing to do with happiness”.[144] Self-knowledge in the form of recovered memories offers blankness.

Her breakthrough about her mother enables Dolores to accept her mother’s death, and begin moving outside the institution and towards an independent life again. In *She’s Come Undone*, institutional help can only take Dolores so far. She gets a job at a photo-developing company and begins crafting a life in the outsider world. Dolores quickly grows frustrated with the reparenting method and decides to leave the program. Her decision is partly influenced by visits to a psychic called Nadine: “I was sick of my stupid past; I wanted a line on my future”.[145] Dolores claims the psychic has been as helpful to her development over three visits as Dr. Shaw has in five years of therapy: “He was the one with tears in his eyes. ‘You’re hard on shoes,’ my mother used to tell me when I was a little girl. I was hard on mothers, too”.[146] Dr. Shaw warns Dolores that the work they have done is unfinished, particularly around

[143] Ibid., 278.
[144] Ibid., 279.
[145] Ibid., 284.
[146] Ibid., 283.

sexuality, but at age 24 Dolores resents the infantilising inherent in reparenting.[147] When Dolores leaves, their experiment is over and Dr. Shaw, the magician, is no longer her mother re-animated: "Dr. Shaw had already become a corpse. I let myself out".[148] In contrast to the final conflict with Bernice where her mother tries desperately to get a reluctant Dolores to leave home and begin anew, in this revised scene Dolores is the one who is eager to venture out into the world. However, her decision to exit the program at this moment also suggests Dr. Shaw is partially right; she is not fully ready to break the cycle yet. Dolores felt guilty about her mother's death but now she has "killed off" her substitute mother as well.

Lamb constructs a positive rewriting of Lolita in Dolores, but the novel muddies a straightforward story of her recovery in her self-sabotaging behaviour. This trend has been disparagingly referred to as 'suffering as a mode of development', but also reflects how healing and managing the effects of trauma is non-linear and uneven. The suggestion that Dolores still has issues to resolve is apparent when she turns away from introspection and her past in order to pursue, at any length, a future in the form of romance. Dolores goes to Nadine immediately after ending her sessions with Dr. Shaw and is asked to draw what might make her happy on her Etch-A-Sketch. Dolores begins to draw a whale, suggesting an projection of her past self, but at last minute turns this image into a man of "whalelike proportions".[149] Dolores turns the image into a man to look forward to the future, presumably by investing in romance and marriage. In a chance development, Dolores discovers pictures of Dante, the boy whose letters and photographs she stole in college, when she works at a photography-processing outlet which she interprets as a fateful sign to pursue him. In

[147] Ibid., 289.
[148] Ibid., 290.
[149] Ibid., 291.

a reckless move, she moves to into his apartment block in Vermont. In a recycled image from Jack that Dolores ignores, their first meeting involves her helping him jumpstart his car. Despite her reservations Dolores falls into a relationship with Dante. Borrowing the same language of time travel that she used with Dr. Shaw, in a jarring metaphor, Dolores describes her relationship with Dante as rewinding time and undoing the traumatic event of her rape: "he [Jack] *hadn't* destroyed me after all. Dante had come along and *un*raped me".[150] In drawing on time metaphors to describe her new romance, Dolores suggests love is a continuation of her healing journey and can take the place of self-examination. However, by associating Dante with cars and time travel, Lamb suggests Dante might be more of a symbolic reflection of, rather than counterpoint to, Jack and Humbert. The time travel metaphor is not simply a reclaimed and inverted metaphor around healers and healing, but signifies Dolores's difficulty distinguishing between those who will help heal her and those who might hurt her.

In Dolores's struggle to identify between healers and abusers, recovery and traumatic repetition, and good and bad "unchanging" men, Lamb troubles the various dualities that Illouz notes of the recovery novel. Dolores's relationship with Dante is a return of the past rather than a healing of it. In a parallel to Joan in *Lady Oracle*, Dolores creates a new self to match her partner's identity; she takes on an increasingly traditional domestic role, doing Dante's household chores: "He nicknamed me 'Home Ec'".[151] Dolores returns to her role as harbourer of secrets by hiding that she is not on the pill, and by creating an imaginary life as a watercolour artist with an ex-boyfriend. She finds herself bereft of friends or a community to talk

[150] Ibid., 316-317.
[151] Ibid., 313.

to about her worries, and when she reads *Our Bodies, Ourselves* (1973) she finds the depiction of united women on the front cover contrasts with the women engaged in small squabbles where she works. The book's celebration of women's sexuality, and open discussion of their bodies and physical experiences as women, is also at odds with her female relationships.[152] Much like in adolescence, a silence pervades her conversation with her Grandmother: "Listening to us talk, you'd have no indication death or sex or craziness existed".[153] Most importantly, the image on the cover of *Our Bodies, Ourselves* is also at odds with Dolores's difficult journey to womanhood: "I was twenty-five years old, sitting in the Montpelier library waiting for the man I loved and who loved me back – but I was also my obese self pouting up in my bedroom at Grandma's".[154] Seven years after she leaves her grandmother's house, she finds herself repeating the same habits and fears and living with a debilitating silence in the home. Dolores finds her relationship with Dante embodies a regressive cyclicality rather than reparative and healing return to the past, as with Dr. Shaw.

Dolores's fresh start is most clearly revealed to be a return of the past when Dante's behaviour becomes abusive. After a reprimand at his school Dante arrives home angry and begins shouting and undermining Dolores, causing her to cry: "He watched me, curious, like a scientist".[155] They make up but the next time they have sex it is far removed from the tenderness she had experienced with him before.[156] Dante's potential for abuse are made clearer when the couple attend a school dance at Dante's workplace. The theme of the party is "Time in a Bottle," in another intertextual connection to Nabokov's "enchanted island", and the hall is decorated in

[152] Boston Women's Health Book Collective. *Our Bodies, Ourselves* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2011 [1973]).
[153] Lamb, *She's Come Undone*, 316.
[154] Ibid., 316.
[155] Ibid., 323.
[156] Ibid., 323.

a beach theme, with papier-mache seashells and mermaids made of first aid dummies. At the party Dante remains in the centre of the room, dancing and entertaining the girls "like a celebrity actor making a guest appearance".[157] In this episode Nabokov's "enchanted island" of nymphets is reimagined as a school disco where Dante is a teacher inappropriately courting the teenage crushes of young girls, who are likewise performing up to a sense of maturity. The girls attempt to present themselves as older and more knowledgeable than they are through swear words and sexually explicit language. Like Humbert's fantasy of Hourglass Lake that is transformed into an off-road dog shelter, Humbert's "enchanted island" is transformed into a more realistic image – the school hall instead of an idyll, and a teacher exploiting his position.

"Rewinding time" doubles as a metaphor for the repetition of traumatic and violent events as well as a hopeful metaphor of recovery. The repetition of trauma is emphasised in the form of Dolores's coerced abortion at Dante's insistence. The regret she feels over the abortion only intensifies and becomes associated in her mind with another form of sexual violence: "I'd managed to avoid sex since the abortion, except for once. That time, his penis felt like a vacuum cleaner up inside me, looking to suck out life".[158] Dolores persists in trying to make it work with Dante and they get married, but the creeping thought that Dante is an amalgamation of Jack and her father never recedes, culminating in a barely consensual act of anal sex. The marriage ends only when Dolores discovers Dante sleeping with a student. They are temporarily brought back together with Dante when her grandmother dies, but it is at her grandmother's funeral that Dante's self-obsessed cruelty is cemented. He excuses his guilt over his affair and intellectualises his abuse of power with a student, calling

[157] Ibid., 327.
[158] Ibid., 341.

the relationship "a conquest – a type of materialism, really".[159] In another double of Humbert, Dante is a parody of his intellectualisation of his perverse desires.

Her grandmother's death, like her mother's when she is 17, forces Dolores into a period of introspection about her life and her next step. Dolores meets up with Roberta, the neighbour who comforted her following the rape, and this time again she helps her come back from another difficult situation. In *She's Come Undone* major life events and ceremonies, such as weddings and funerals, reinforce connections between women. In one evening Dolores tells Roberta what she has hidden from her husband, and Dr.. Shaw, for several years: "Before I could stop myself, I was explaining about college and Gracewood and my technique of imagining mold".[160] Speaking about her past with Roberta begins a series of confessions that see her confronting Dante for coercing her abortion and sleeping with a former student: "Every bite you take, it's like you're eating her up. Which is what we did, in a way, Dante. First, we made her, then we ate her up".[161] While her mother's death inspires Dolores to create and play with a range of alternate identities for herself, now she is honest about her life for the first time with Dante. She reveals the truth about the multitudinous lies she has been telling about herself. She reveals her past rape and weight gain, her interception of his letters to Kippy, her stay in a mental institution and her real parentage: "You see, Dante, people don't fall so easily into the categories you put them in – heroes and villains, unfettered and –what? – fettered? In some ways, Dante, *you're* the one who's uncomplicated".[162] Dolores finds a kind of retribution in conveying to Dante some semblance of what she has felt as his victim, and closure from the long-standing events emerging in her adolescence.

[159] Ibid., 378.
[160] Ibid., 394.
[161] Ibid., 398.
[162] Ibid., 399.

It is only when Dolores commits to recovering from her marital breakup that she begins to continue with her self-development that she began with Dr. Shaw. Lamb depicts Dolores rebuilding her life and her relationship with the past by transforming symbols of repression and abuse into something positive. The destruction of her childhood home is the clearest motif of Dolores's evolving acceptance and resolution of her history. The ceiling "literally and figuratively" falls in: "Another slab fell. I felt like a soldier at war".[163] The destruction of the house and Dolores's attempts to fix it bring her into contact with kind figures from her past and figures of her future. The most significant of these figures is a man from her college class called Thayer, who fixes her ceiling and pursues a relationship with Dolores. Dolores tells him everything, from Jack Speight to her wanting a baby. After some twists and turns she overcomes her fear of pain and takes a risk with Thayer's offer of "happily-maybe-sometimes-ever-after".[164] The curse of the "house of repression" that Bernice cautioned against has been beaten, with the house transformed into a new home for a community of friends.[165]

The concluding chapters of the novel depict a hopeful ending for Dolores with Thayer and her future. She connects Thayer's large frame with an Etch-A-Sketch image she created at age 24, a bear-like figure she declared would be her future husband. With Thayer, Lamb returns to metaphors of enchantment, with Dolores suggesting that "a psychic told me to draw what would make me happy and I drew you. Memorized you before I shook you free".[166] Although this implies Dolores might be projecting an image on to Thayer and repeating a damaging cycle, his connection to whale imagery suggests a more optimistic reading: "with my head against his chest,

[163] Ibid., 422, 424.
[164] Ibid., 454.
[165] Ibid., 133.
[166] Ibid., 458.

my eyelids closed against his sweatshirt, I saw him. Recognised him. Part man, part whale".[167] The novel concludes with Thayer taking Dolores out on a boat at Cape Cod, and alone on the deck Dolores sees a whale breach. The return to the site of her attempted suicide to see this live creature, as opposed to a dead one, signifies her emotional and spiritual wellbeing: "Then the water darkens back to normal and, though it's quiet, something is happening – something private only *I* can feel".[168] Lamb centralises the importance of Dolores's independent journey in this episode but in the concluding image of the novel he depicts both Dolores and Thayer watching the whale rise and fall into the water together: "I'm soaked in her spray. Christened. I laugh and cry and lick my salty lips… I'm shouting, too, shoving back against the others toward him".[169] Dolores's marital happiness signifies an important, affirmative development in her history of male violence and past traumas. At the story's end Dolores thwarts her tragic familial destiny and achieves personal fulfilment as well as emotional development.

While Eva Illouz has noted how recovery novels subvert the generic conventions of romance, gothic and tragedy, my analysis locates the genre differently through an intertextual reclaiming of the victim as survivor. Lamb's novel complicates Berlant's description of recovery novels as "juxtapolitical", in that they gesture towards political themes but fail to incorporate them meaningfully into narrative.[170] *She's Come Undone* engages with a rewriting of *Lolita* that cannot be divorced from social commentary. Brian Boyd notes that in 1958 Lolita's domestic conclusion was radical to some readers because it failed to depict "Lolita ultimately

[167] Ibid., 458.
[168] Ibid., 465.
[169] Ibid., 465.
[170] Berlant, *The Female Complaint,* (Duke University Press, 2008), 3.

[as] wrecked by Humbert, a prostitute, psychically crippled".[171] In comparison Lamb depicts Dolores as coming back from this trauma, albeit with various setbacks. Boyd argues that in Lolita's escape from several sexual abusers into domesticity, Nabokov depicts "an extraordinary young girl who triumphs over her fate in the only way left to her" even though she still cannot survive it.[172] In *She's Come Undone,* Lamb stresses the ordinariness of Dolores and of the abusive men in her life. Lamb's rewriting of Lolita imagines a new ending for the abused character in community and potentially in domesticity. While the recovery novel typically ends with conventional markers of happiness, including marriage, read in the context of a literary tradition of tragic endings this itself is imbricated in politics. Lamb's novel's conventionality *is part of* its rewriting of *Lolita*. Lamb writes a future for an abused woman character that is positive if hard earned. Connecting *She's Come Undone* to *Lolita* suggests new ways of evaluating Lamb's work and recovery novels more generally in a social, if not radical, light.

In conclusion, *She's Come Undone* should be read as a counter-narrative to Nabokov's *Lolita* that explores the pervasive silence around an abused girl's testimony and the possibilities for recovery missing in previous fictional depictions of abuse. Dolores is an inversion of Lolita whose trauma is made material and ongoing in the form of her fatness. Lamb satirises recovery tropes in his depiction of healers and moments of confession and conflict, and undermines the recovery novel's primary trope: the movement from suffering to triumphant recovery. In depicting a positive ending for Dolores, the novel implicitly asserts the distance between the 1960s and 1990s, yet in unsettling her journey to recovery, Lamb gestures towards

[171] Brian Boyd, "Even Homais Nods": Nabokov's Fallibility, or, How to Revise Lolita" *Nabokov Studies*, 2 (1995), 237.
[172] Ibid., 237.

how far society has to go in terms of understanding the social and political dimensions of trauma and recovery.

She's Come Undone is representative of how fictional representations of fatness move beyond tragicomic characterisation in *Lady Oracle* to grittier and emotionally heavy subjects in the 1990s. Dolores's fatness is depicted as a conceptual excess, with her weight representing her own and her family's pain. Lamb's depiction of weight gain as a metaphor for trauma feeds into negative conceptions of fat bodies and explores the idea that one can see a person's history on their body. Joan in *Lady Oracle* and Dolores both lose weight when they separate from their mothers and enter the public sphere. In contrast to Atwood, though, Lamb depicts the process of separating from the mother as a process of breaking away from a family cycle of death and Dolores is the more optimistic depiction, not least because of the abuse she overcomes. Characters that "do not fit" also strain against the genres in which the novelists contain them: Dolores and Joan frustrate plots that hinge on progressive development towards self-knowledge and psychological wellbeing. Finally, both novelists satirise and trouble psychoanalytic theory and practice – in Lamb's case, through the unuusla psychoanalyst Dr. Shaw. Atwood and Lamb reflect on, or anticipate, psychoanalytic theorisations of fatness and each novel undermines its logic of sudden, lasting and triumphant change. In the following chapter that focuses on Susan Stinson's *Venus of Chalk* (2004), I examine how "size-positive" depictions represent fatness and explore sexuality, mobility and citizenship without weight loss in 2000s North American fiction.

Chapter Four

Expanding the American Woman's Road Narrative: Fat, Mobility and Belonging in Susan Stinson's *Venus of Chalk*

Susan Stinson's third publication *Venus of Chalk* (2004) culminates in protagonist Carline, a lesbian, fat woman, accepting that she will not be able to outrun her unresolved issues with her body. Reflecting on her road trip from Massachusetts to the fictional town of Chalk, Texas, she notes: "I had thought I wanted stasis, old bonds, a place where I would be so familiar as to be unrecognisable, so had come to Chalk to be the homely niece of a maiden aunt… Instead, I found sexuality as present as breath, and nothing simple about breathing".[1] This chapter examines Carline's journey to body acceptance and community in *Venus of Chalk*, analysing how Stinson embraces the road trip narrative to explore the social experience of fatness and its intersection with sexuality, space and history. Building on Alexandra Ganser's argument that women's road narratives either dissolve the duality between the road and the domestic space, or depict a quest for the "ideal home", I argue that neither the road nor the domestic space in *Venus of Chalk* is presented as an ideal site; instead, Stinson invests in alternative spaces that are ephemeral, mobile and shifting that represent a positive relationship with nature, history and art.[2] In the first two parts of the chapter I establish how Stinson explores Carline's experience of fat prejudice by

[1] Susan Stinson, *Venus of Chalk* (Ann Arbor, MI: Firebrand Books, 2004), 156.
[2] Alexandra Ganser, *Roads of Her Own: Gendered Space and Mobility in American Women's Road Narratives, 1970-2000* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009), 35.

depicting firstly, how the road turns into a space of negative freedom for Carline through fat hyper-visibility and passing as a straight woman, and secondly, how her Aunt Frankie's home is a site of secret sexual relationships and lesbian history that go unspoken. Carline achieves escape and freedom in women's communities that represent a connection to nature and history. Alongside this analyse of Stinson's social themes I draw on Norman Holland's psychoanalytic theory of narrative pleasure to connect Carline's struggle to find a "home" to a buried mother-daughter story. This combines the pleasure of a familiar story of oral fixation and maternal conflict with more radical social themes. In conclusion, I argue that Stinson creates a doubly pleasurable text that depicts Carline as finding refuge, acceptance and contentment both psychologically and socially, without bodily change.

Venus of Chalk follows middle-aged protagonist Carline as she negotiates a fat-phobic society and a history of self-loathing and she travels to the place where she first self-harmed: her childhood summer home. Carline's story begins in Massachusetts where she lives a fulfilling life with her partner Lilian and has a job creating home economics pamphlets. While Lilian is away, Carline is chased and verbally attacked by a group of teenage boys outside her home, which triggers a resurgence of buried pain and shame about her body. Then, on her morning commute to work the bus driver, Tucker, offers Carline and the other passengers on his bus the opportunity to take advantage of a one-time bus ride to Texas the very next morning. Carline decides to take up the opportunity to visit her Aunt Frankie, a formerly close relative who is grieving the death of Ida, a woman Carline believes is her Aunt's best friend. As Carline embarks on her road trip with Tucker and another passenger called Mel she embraces a sense of anonymity, taking the opportunity to withhold the knowledge that she is a lesbian from her companions. Her flight into

inconspicuousness ends abruptly when Carline discovers that Tucker has taken a photograph of her swimming nude in the motel swimming pool where they have stopped for the night. Feeling angry and violated, Carline declines to continue her journey with him and walks the remaining distance to an Amtrak station where she catches a train to Dallas followed by a van to Chalk, where she is welcomed by her Aunt and her Aunt's friends. She is soon joined by an apologetic Tucker and Mel who both end up staying with them.

During her stay, a series of very personal discoveries are made that challenge Carline's worldview, including the realisation that Ida was her Aunt's lover. As Carline begins to adjust to what appears to be a secret lesbian family history, Carline discovers that a sexual relationship has now developed between her Aunt and Mel. Carline's discoveries about her Aunt leave her increasingly uncertain and ungrounded, leading Carline to steal Ida's prized car without telling anyone. In her rashness Carline drives to Lake Merle where she swims in the muddy lake and, afterwards, develops Tucker's photograph of herself swimming nude. Carline eventually returns to Frankie's home and confronts Frankie about her relationships. Frankie asks Carline to leave, and Carline flies back to Massachusetts. Carline returns three days later with Lilian to attend Ida's memorial and support her Aunt and her travel companions. The novel ends with Carline resolving to create a pamphlet based on her road trip, while Aunt Frankie decides to sell her home in Chalk and embark on a travel adventure alone. *Venus of Chalk* embraces the road trip genre in its exploration of a fat woman's experience in social space, and from within this genre it skews conventions to depict a story in which size is viewed positively, as is queer love and the non-biological "family" community formed in Chalk.

The author of four novels and one poetry collection, Stinson writes texts that feature lesbian, fat protagonists across a range of genres, including coming-of-age narratives, historical fiction, and road fiction. A committed fat activist, Stinson has been recognised for her contribution to fat acceptance more broadly through her nonfiction publications in *The Fat Studies Reader* (2009) and journal *Healthy Weight Journal* and *The Women's Review of Books* but there has yet to be a dedicated or in-depth analysis of her writing.[3] Fat, queer scholar and activist Charlotte Cooper put together a comprehensive Fat Activist Timeline that includes all of Stinson's fiction texts, even though the timeline is otherwise lacking any reference to fiction.[4] The inclusion of Stinson suggests Cooper considers her work as fulfilling an important activist function too, but also points towards the lack of recognition of fiction in fat acceptance activism and scholarship. While short survey chapters and articles on fat fiction by Kathleen LeBesco and Elana Dykewomon identify Stinson as a leading voice in sensuous depictions of fatness, their analyses are declarative and summative rather than extensive and expansive.[5] For example, Kathleen LeBesco argues that Stinson's poetry collection *Belly Songs: A Celebration of Fat Women* (1993) marks an important milestone for its depiction of women "*enjoying* fat", noting how Stinson's poems "revel in the glory of the fat body".[6] Lesbian writer and feminist activist Elana Dykewomon goes further in hoping that Stinson's writing heralds a

[3] Susan Stinson, "Speakout Against Fat Hatred" *Healthy Weight Journal* 14 (2000) and "Nothing Succeeds like Excess: Corporate Greed Goes Unchecked in a Fat-Phobic Society" *The Women's Review of Books* (2001). The former led to a fat acceptance rally in Northampton, Massachusetts in 2000. Susan Stinson, "Fat Girls Need Fiction" in Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay (eds) *The Fat Studies Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 2009). Stinson also contributed the short story "Magnetic Force" to Susan Koppelman (ed) *The Strange History of Suzanne LaFleshe and Other Stories of Women and Fatness* (New York: Feminist Press, 2003), which was expanded into *Venus of Chalk* later.

[4] Charlotte Cooper, *A Queer and Trans Fat Activist Timeline* (2011) www.charlottecooper.net/downloads/timelinezine/cooper_queertransfatactivisttimeline_zine_0411.pdf (accessed 15th March 2016).

[5] Kathleen Lebesco, *Revolting Bodies?: The Struggle to Redefine Fat Identity* (Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004) and Elana Dykewomon, "In Search of the Fabled Fat Woman" *Fat Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Body Weight and Society* 3.1 (2014).

[6] LeBesco, *Revolting Bodies?* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2004), 47-48.

"new generation" of fat lesbian representations that focuses on the fat woman as adventuring hero: "When Susan Stinson began writing novels, I was delighted, I thought, here it is: the world cracked open. Fat women, fat lesbians, have agency and power".[7] This chapter examines the fat explorer in more depth to argue that when Stinson places her protagonist on the road in *Venus of Chalk* Stinson's fascination with fat bodies is brought into closer dialogue with her fat acceptance activism. Stinson creates a size-positive road narrative in which fat characters are explorers and rebels, but more importantly social agents and national subjects, whose stories are driven by the desire for place and belonging.

The late 1990s and early 2000s was a transformative period for fictions featuring fat central characters, as the publishing industry boomed with novels, young adult fictions, and memoirs about fat experience or weight loss, all of which focused on fat protagonists.[8] As outlined in Chapter 1, the discovery of a readership of fat-themed texts can be attributed in part at least to the increased focus on fiction by size acceptance activist groups, who began publishing "fat fiction" anthologies and launching publishing houses, and the increased visibility of fat people as a consumer base as rates of obesity were rising in the 1990s. Stinson's *Venus of Chalk* is a representative text in a cluster of the most popular novels, including Jennifer Weiner's *Good in Bed* (2003) and Douglas Coupland's *Eleanor Rigby* (2004), that feature middle-aged women narrators navigating fat prejudice as they embark on journeys of self-acceptance that do not involve weight loss. This cluster of fictions, and Stinson's for its more overt traveller themes, can be considered an ur-text for more fantastic

[7] Dykewomon, "In Search of the Fabled Fat Woman", 2.
[8] Sarah A. Shelton in "'As their waistlines recede': Tracing and challenging the fat quest in young adult literature" *Fat Studies An Interdisciplinary Journal of Body Weight and Society* 5.2 (2016), 172-174. Kathryn E. Linder in "The Fat Memoir as Autopathography: Self-Representations of Embodied Fatness" *Auto/biography Studies* 26.2 (2011), 219; Lara Frater 'Fat Heroines in Chick-Lit: Gateway to Acceptance in the Mainstream?" in Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay (eds) *The Fat Studies Reader* (New York University Press, 2009), 235-236.

"traveller-in-a-strange-land" novels later, such as Charlie Lovett's *The Program* (2008), Frannie Zellman's *The FatLand Trilogy* (2008) and Tracey L. Thompson's *Fatropolis* (2012), which explore parallel worlds where characters either body swap into thin bodies and nightmarish situations, or enter into fantastical worlds where fat is destigmatised and defines both the norm and conceptions of desirability.[9] In relation to Weiner's chick lit novel, Coupland's elegiac narrative of loss, and Stinson's road narrative, these texts initially seem disparate in tone and genre but the narrative trajectories of their protagonists are all anchored in themes of fatness, mobility and body acceptance as opposed to weight loss, and feature formative journeys on foot, or by bus or by plane. The depiction of fat characters as travellers and mobile subjects represents a significant development in characterisation that engages with fat experience as, above all, a struggle to belong. In the early 2000s, Stinson's road narrative offers the best and most self-conscious exploration of fatness, space and place that creatively intervenes in both the pleasure and fantasies bodily journey narratives can represent.

The road narrative, popularised by Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957), typically follows a character that pursues escape, freedom and adventure on the road. One of the earliest studies of the road narrative, Ronald Primeau's *Romance of the Road: The Literature of the American Highway* (1996), identifies three "formulaic patterns" of the genre that include social and political protest, the search for a national identity, and self-discovery.[10] While Primeau established the significance of mythologies of transcendence and rebellion to road narratives, more recent criticism by Kris Lackey and Katie Mills has critiqued this formulaic commonality and

[9] Charlie Lovett's *The Program* (Nashville: Pearlsong Press, 2008), Frannie Zellman's *The FatLand Trilogy* (Nashville: Pearlsong Press, 2008); Tracey L. Thompson's *Fatropolis* (Nashville: Pearlsong Press, 2012).
[10] Ronald Primeau, *Romance of the Road* (Ohio: Bowling Green State University Press, 1996), 15.

attempted to historicise the road narrative within its context.[11] Lackey and Mills first expanded the road narrative to feature protagonists who are not white men, and established how the mythology of the road as a symbol of freedom relies on a form of cultural forgetting that erases how, historically and in the present, social space is threatening and dangerous for people of colour and for women travellers. These studies build on a scholarship of women's depictions of travel, departures and self-actualising quests that Dana Heller invigorated in 1990 with *The Feminization of Quest-Romance: Radical Departures* and was developed by Janis Stout, Heidi Slettedahl Macpherson, Sidonie Smith, Kristi Siegel and Ganser.[12] Ganser in particular, has argued that women's travel narratives on the road reveal a distinct challenge to the dominant "spatial formations" of the road as freedom and the home as domesticity, dependence, and entrapment.[13] In women's narratives the binary distinctions between these two spaces are put in dialogue, if not conflict, to highlight women's experience in social space and the difficulty of leaving domesticity or finding a home. Ganser analyses women's relation to the domestic space in particular by showing how women in fiction construct different relationships to home on the

[11] Primeau and Rowland A. Sherrill in *Road-Book America: Contemporary Culture and the New Picaresque* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000). Kris Lackey's *Road Frames: The American Highway Narrative* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), and Katie Mills's *The Road Story and the Rebel: Moving through Film, Fiction, and Television* (Carbondale, Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 2006).

[12] Dana Heller, *The Feminization of Quest-Romance Radical Departures* (Texas: University of Texas Press, 1990). There are several other texts that have made defined and analysed women's quest and road travel narratives, including Janis Stout, *Through the Window, Out the Door: Women's Narratives of Departure, from Austin and Cather, to Tyler, Morrison, and Didion* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1998); Heidi Slettedahl Macpherson, *Women's Movement: Escape as Transgression in North American Feminist Fiction* (Amsterdam: Rodopi 2000); Sidonie Smith, *Moving Lives: Twentieth-Century Women's Travel Writing*. (University of Minnesota Press, 2001); Kristi Siegel, *Gender, Genre, and Identity in Women's Travel Writing* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004); Ganser, *Roads of Her Own* (Rodopi, 2009).

[13] Ganser, *Roads of Her Own* (Rodopi, 2009), 14. Alongside Ganser, there are several other texts that have made defined and analysed women's road narratives. Deborah Paes de Barros, *Fast Cars and Bad Girls: Nomadic Subjects and Women's Road Stories* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004)*;* Deborah Clarke, *Driving Women: Fiction and Automobile Culture in Twentieth-Century America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007); Ann Brigham, *American Road Narratives: Reimagining Mobility in Literature and Film* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2015).

road: the quester seeks "the ideal home", the nomad "dismantles the duality of home and away, private and public", and the picara disdains "the necessity of home altogether".[14] Out of these three "types", in *Venus of Chalk,* Carline most closely aligns with the quester who seeks the "ideal home", but as the novel progresses Stinson interrogates the (im)possibility of an "ideal home" for Carline. In what follows, this chapter evaluates the ways in which *Venus of Chalk* challenges the mythologies of both the road and the domestic realm as ideal spaces through which to explore a fat lesbian woman's experience in social space, drawing on criticism by Ann Brigham, for example, on how road narratives in the 2000s focus on journeys where the "mysterious adventure" of the road involves a return to/of the family.[15]

The pursuit of the "ideal home" is intertwined with Carline's psychological journey of body-acceptance and familial connection that is also a palpable element of her journey. In *Venus of Chalk*, psychological conflicts are sublimated into other forms: Carline's destructive behaviour is transformed from eating (oral fixation) to self-harming her skin, and her desire to reconnect with a maternal nurturing figure is transferred from her mother (who died when she was a child) to her aunt. The psychosexual oral fixation and mother-daughter conflict explored in *Lady Oracle* and *She's Come Undone* is still played out, then, but at a distance and in less obvious terms. To make sense of these changes it is helpful to turn to Norman Holland's work on psychoanalysis, narrative pleasure and the story form in *The Dynamics of Literary Response* (1968).[16] Holland invokes Sigmund Freud's drive theory to propose that a reader's response and pleasure in a story is related to the wish fulfilment or anxiety management of psychological needs and primal fantasies, such as oedipal conflicts and psychosexual fixations. Holland's central thesis is that story is fantasy, where

[14] Ganser, *Roads of Her Own* (Rodopi, 2009), 35.
[15] Brigham, *American Road Narratives* (University of Virginia Press, 2015), 4.
[16] Norman Holland, *The Dynamics of Literary Response* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968).

manifest (overt) content disguises, represses and sublimates drive-based latent (unconscious, implicit) fantasies for the reader into more socially, politically acceptable forms: "In effect, the literary work dreams a dream for us. It embodies and evokes in us a central fantasy; then it manages that fantasy by devices that were they in mind, we would call defences, but being on the page, we call 'form'. And the having of the fantasy and feeling it managed gives us pleasure".[17] Stinson buries the psychosexual drama under the struggle for and achievement of a queer and fat-positive storyline, marrying and transferring the pleasure and enjoyment derived from an oral and oedipal fantasy into more radical social themes.

In the early chapters of *Venus of Chalk*, Stinson establishes how Carline's decision to embark on a road trip is motivated by complicated feelings of bodily shame rather than wanderlust or adventurousness. Carline's road trip reflects a subtle adaptation of what Ganser identifies as a journey of need that is "motivated by economic or political necessity".[18] Ganser argues that women's road narratives offer an important critique of the "somewhat romanticized" theories of "nomadic mobility" by stressing that the paths women follow are "chosen under pressure more than out of pleasure".[19] In *Venus of Chalk,* Stinson depicts Carline's road trip as chosen under pressure but the pressure is emotional and psychological rather than economic or political. Stinson's road narrative explores the complex and on-going relationship between embodied, lived experience as an othered social subject and the unfinished, and perhaps impossible, project of total self-acceptance. In her depiction of Carline's journey as catalysed by fat-phobic harassment, Stinson critiques the "liberatory

[17] Ibid., 75.
[18] Ganser, *Roads of Her Own* (Rodopi, 2009), 34.
[19] Ibid., 34, 180.

theorization of travel" that Ganser identifies, but also explores how a sense of belonging and place is rendered fraught and fragile in an unaccepting society.[20]

In contrast to Atwood's *Lady Oracle* (1976) and Lamb's *She's Come Undone* (1992), *Venus of Chalk* begins with a middle-aged woman protagonist who has established a happy work and domestic home life without losing weight. Carline's life with Lilian is rich in sensuality, with a prologue including Lilian's erotic writing about Carline and her body. Carline's body is first introduced to the text through the words of her lover and in a graphic, passionate sexual encounter: "Four fingers in, I watch the underside of her belly ripple, curving lewdly, fat with abandon. I kiss the crease at its base".[21] Stinson's graphic depiction of Carline's fat body is one of love and desire, rather than self-reproach, as in Joan's *Lady Oracle*, or humiliation like in *Big Brother*. Stinson continues in a tradition of positive depictions of fat bodies and lesbian sexuality that was established by Audre Lorde in her memoir-fiction *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982) and which she articulates most clearly in the essay "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic As Power" (1978).[22] The potential Lorde finds in sexuality, most notably in the erotic, resonates with Carline's depiction and her relationship with Lilian. Lorde discusses love, sexuality and the erotic as a mode of personal (individual; private) and political (collective; radical) power that women are often taught to suppress: "The erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed and unrecognized feeling".[23] Connecting with this inner resource is central to any emancipation project and female community: "When we look away from the importance of the erotic in the development and sustenance of the our power, or when

[20] Ibid., 16.
[21] Stinson,*Venus of Chalk*, 3.
[22] Audre Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic As Power" in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 1984), 53-59.
[23] Ibid., 53.

we look away from ourselves as we satisfy our erotic needs in concert with others, we use each other as objects of satisfaction rather than share our joy in the satisfying, rather than make connection with our similarities and our differences".[24] By beginning the novel with a prologue that celebrates Carline's fat body in a creative forum with a group of fellow women, Stinson establishes the significance of connecting, and re-connecting, positively with the body and with the erotic for Carline's creative, social and personal journey.

In *Venus of Chalk* Stinson mines history to recover lost depictions of fuller bodies to point to a longer cultural history of the fat female body. Kathleen LeBesco argues that Stinson's depiction of fat bodies as warm and voluptuous reverses negative associations of fatness as sick and poses "a challenge to the perception of fat as grotesque and deadly".[25] In *Venus of Chalk* acts of nurturing and washing become sources of pleasure: "Lilian was my size. Her body flooded my hands with softness. It pleased me to make her desserts".[26] In a description of Carline washing Lilian, Stinson depicts the fat body next to, and literally bathing in, the image of a prehistoric fat female figure: "I would fill a plastic pitcher with water and gently lift her breasts and belly to rinse underneath. Lately, I soaped each beloved fold with a bar shaped like the Venus of Willendorf".[27] The Venus of Willendorf sculpture is one of many symbols that Stinson invokes to create positive associations for fatness. The inspiration behind the title *Venus of Chalk,* the Venus of Willendorf is a Stone Age carved sculpture of a woman, or goddess, with large breasts, stomach and legs that is said to be one of the earliest depictions of a female body.[28] In recovering such

[24] Ibid., 59.
[25] Ibid., 48.
[26] Ibid., 16.
[27] Ibid., 16.
[28] Alan F. Dixson and Barnaby J. Dixson, "Venus Figurines of the European Paleolithic: Symbols of Fertility or Attractiveness?" *Journal of Anthropology* (2011), 1-11.

symbols, Stinson points to the invisible or little-known history of fatness that disputes contemporary conceptions of fatness as a modern phenomenon that is new, unusual and unnatural.[29] Fat studies critic Francis Ray White has analysed public discourse and visual culture in recent publications on fat, diet and the "obesity problem". [30] White points out an iconography of human (d)evolution has emerged around fat through which one image reoccurs: satirical depictions of the "march of progress". In these images the final figure is a fat man who is often eating, with a slow pace, either being in a car or in front of a television. These images depict fat people as slowing down human progress and a modern, threatening anomaly to an otherwise consistent and heroic history of progress and advancement. In Carline and Lilian's home, a positive and progressive history of fatness is epitomised in their Venus of Willendorf soap and the ashtray that sits naturally within their home next to their feminist fiction: "the echoes of our bodies, Lil's and mine, in the fat goddess theme made me laugh. We kept the ashtray on the table next to the salt and pepper shakers".[31] In Stinson's novel, the domestic space is a site that is far from constraining, unlike depictions in previous women's road novels and films. Ganser has made the point that scholars have not discussed home much at all, except to argue that the road traveller's "quest for freedom" represents a "flight from domesticity".[32] In this novel, the fat goddess is

[29] There have emerged a series of cultural histories of fat that contest the growing exceptionalism of fat to the modern period by revealing how fat bodies have always existed in society as far back as the eighteenth century and arguing that the pathologisation of fat as a late modern phenomenon. For example, Peter N. Stearns *Fat History: Bodies and Beauty in the Modern West* (New York: New York University Press, 2002), Sander Gilman's *Fat: A Cultural History of Obesity* (London: Polity, 2008), Georges Vigarello, *The Metamorphoses of Fat: A History of Obesity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), and Elena Levy-Navarro in *The Culture of Obesity in Early and Late Modernity: Body Image in in Shakespeare, Jonson, Middleton, and Skelton* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008).

[30] Francis Ray White in '"We're kind of devolving": visual tropes of evolution in obesity discourse' in Lee Monaghan, Rachel Colls, and Bethan Evans (eds) *Obesity Discourse and Fat Politics* (London: Routledge, 2015), 73.

[31] Stinson, *Venus of Chalk,* 16.

[32] Ganser, *Roads of Her Own*, 14. Texts that depict the flight from a constraining homelife or restrictive gender roles have defined the genre and include, Emily Post's *By Motor to the Golden Gate* (New York: Kessinger Publishing, 1916), Anne Roiphe's *Long Division* (London and New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972), Doris Betts's *Heading West* (New York: Alfred a Knopf, 1981), Barbara Kingsolver's

wonderfully in keeping with an image of a sensuous and creative queer, feminist domesticity.

While the home of Carline and Lilian offers a positive image of domesticity, it is also a space that is continually unsettled and under threat from others. The home space is initially transgressed by Aunt Frankie's gifts that include "flurries of clippings" about "weight loss advice",[33] Aunt Jemima "potholders" and oven gloves based on racist stereotypes of black women.[34] Carline throws away the clippings as they arrive and buries the potholder in the back of a cupboard until a furious Lilian discovers it. Then, in an episode that is literally as well as symbolically violent, Carline is threatened by a group of teenage boys. While attempting to look at the moon in her street, Carline is chased by the boys who throw lit cigarettes in her hair and shout words like pig, fat and "Sooee". The attack unearths buried issues concerning her body: "I didn't approve of self-hatred, but that was no help as I leaned over the kitchen sink, wheezing with pain as if I had inhaled a burning world. Fat. It always came back to that".[35] Like the Aunt Jemima potholder she has hidden in the depths of the home, Carline's buried shame over her fatness is rediscovered during this altercation: "Vicious comments on the street, carefully worded references to 'professional appearance' in job reviews, suddenly masked looks on the faces of friends; at this moment, hatred was all I could see, all I could breathe, all I was".[36] The attack leads Carline to self-harm by burning herself with a match, behaviour that she had put to rest after her teenage years. Carline describes how feelings of self-

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The Bean Trees (Abacus; New Ed edition, 1985/2001), Mona Simpson's *Anywhere But Here* (New York: Alfred a Knopf, 1986), *Thelma and Louise* (dir. Ridley Scott, 1991). In Ganser's study texts that branch out of this mode have also received more attention, such as Cynthia Kadohata's *The Floating World* (New York: Viking, 1989) Chelsea Cain's *Dharma Girl: A Road Trip Across the American Generations* (Berkeley: Seal Press, 1996), and Hilma Wolitzer's *Hearts* (New York and London Random House, 2006).

[33] Stinson, *Venus of Chalk,* 17.

[34] Ibid., 35.

[35] Ibid., 20.

[36] Ibid., 20.

loathing led her to self-harm as a teenager, etching "pits and scratches" into her arms: "Physical pain had been a focus, almost a relief".[37] While binge eating for Joan in *Lady Oracle* and for Dolores in *She's Come Undone* is a way of making visible otherwise invisible wounds, in *Venus of Chalk* Stinson refuses to reinforce the stereotype that for fat women excessive consumption is a form of self-inflicted violence. Instead, the burn becomes the physical evidence of emotional disturbance, specifically the re-emergence of feelings of shame and self-hate from fresh contact with a hostile environment.

In these early events Stinson recurring psychoanalytical tropes in depictions of fatness are transferred into different events, behaviours and relationship. For example, this thesis has uncovered in Atwood's *Lady Oracle* and Lamb's *She's Come Undone* that eating is a fraught activity related to both self-comfort and self-harm due to a mother's overbearing or neglectful nurturing. This maternal conflict reflects, to different degrees and with different levels of subversion and irony, conceptions of inconsistent nurturing and fatness that Nancy Chodorow and Susie Orbach popularised in 1978. According to Chodorow and Orbach mothers inflect damage on their daughters through a process of neglect and smothering, and only respond to their daughters' subsequent physical and mental independence by becoming overbearing.[38] Feeding and eating is intimately connected to the act of nurturing, and becomes a realm where these tensions are played out and daughters seek to self-nurture. This logic positions and even pathologises fat women as suffering from a psychosexual (oral) fixation. Stinson evokes and subverts this psychoanalytic logic in her story. For example, Stinson depicts the home as a distinctly safe and loving space for Carline,

[37] Ibid., 21.
[38] Nancy Chodorow*, The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender.* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 99-100; Susie Orbach, *Fat is a Feminist Issue* (New York and London: Paddington Press, 1978), 40.

and it is the outside world that is threatening and suffocating. Her maternal conflict is sublimated into her aunt, who sends Carline unwelcome and destabilising gifts and is generally distant and reserved. She self-harms, but these self-destructive behaviours are inflected onto the body in the form of burning and cutting. These changes effectively distant oral and maternal themes at the same time as keeping crucial aspects of this particular psychoanalytical fantasy alive. Stinson negotiates and balances a desire for a story of psychological growth and healing without wholly replicating negative ideas of fat immaturity and trauma that have recurred in psychological understandings and that have been explored in earlier fictions of fatness.

In other road narratives, the hero is typically an outsider who seeks exploration and excitement but in *Venus of Chalk* Carline's outsider status is an affective state and the result of prejudice and abuse. Her status as social outcast is an imposed identity rather than the result of a political awakening or a rejection of society: "I could appear to be in utter control, but part of me was constantly wrestling with the awareness of being despised for my body, and, worse, the moments of despising it myself". [39] Her forced outsider status is signified too in the defamiliarisation of her home and neighbourhood, which is apparent when she leaves the house. Carline senses "the decaying smell stayed thick above the dumpster, but I felt as if I were breathing something cleaner" and "there was no longer a moon".[40] Even though Carline is standing on her own doorstep, the world after the attack appears newly harsh and alien. Later on, Stinson depicts the moon as a positive symbol of the female body: "Dazed, I compared the underside of my breast to the

[39] Stinson, *Venus of Chalk,* 22.
[40] Ibid., 23.

moon's north-western crescent limb. Both had shadows and pores".[41] The moon is another example of how Stinson evokes historic and natural wonders to frame fat as natural and beautiful. Carline says: "I had read on the map that nature's favorite shape was a sphere. People saw the world that way, I decided, because our eyes were orbs. True crescents, the map claimed, were almost never found. I touched my belly, and thought it could be either a crescent or a globe".[42] After the street altercation, Carline loses a sense of herself and her body as beautiful, natural and belonging in the world.

Unlike road narratives that depict protagonists setting out on the open road as freedom from plans or specific destinations, Carline's journey has a single and clear destination. While Carline is struggling with her mental health and her Aunt is grieving the loss of her friend, the opportunity to take a bus to Texas arrives. Carline asks bus driver Tucker if he is accepting passengers for the journey, going against her reasoned character: "I said the impractical thing I was thinking. 'Take us with you. Why drive all the way to Texas alone?'"[43] Carline wants to travel as a retreat from her current life and a return to the site of an original, unresolved psychological issues: "I needed to go to Texas, where Frankie was feeling sad among her dish towels; where I last turned violence on my body's failures twenty years ago".[44] Carline later reveals: "I felt not only empathy for my Aunt's grief, but also the grate and pull of my body's private history".[45] Carline's journey is more instinctive than consciously chosen, and more necessary than optional. In an uncharacteristically impulsive move Carline quits her job.[46] In contrast to other women's road narratives, Carline puts her livelihood and economic safety on the line to pursue a quest for self-acceptance.

[41] Ibid., 48.
[42] Ibid., 48.
[43] Ibid., 29.
[44] Ibid., 32-33.
[45] Ibid., 33.
[46] Ibid., 33.

Carline's trip is motivated by psychological necessity alongside a desire to revisit her past and reclaim public social space, which is most clear in the fact that her journey takes place on public transport instead of in a car – that is, a bus is a public space, whereas a car is private or individual. She begins taking up space on the journey to Lilian's slam poetry event by taking up the entire backseat of a bus "usually staked out by impassive boys who held their legs wide apart to claim extra space".[47] On the bus Carline recalls her first meeting with Lilian at a poetry reading, where Lilian reads the poem "Who Goes with Fergus?" (1893) by modernist Irish poet W. B. Yeats that is based on an Irish myth of King Fergus, who turns away from personal troubles and worldly possessions in order to learn the wisdom of nature.[48] Carline's recollection of this poem as she is about to embark on her own journey warrants comparison to Yeats's central character: she, too, is on a journey "toward death, or away from it into mystery", looking to leave behind personal troubles in search of a reconnection with nature and mythical history.[49] As she changes from bus to train, she daydreams too: "the idea was frightening but romantic, like hopping a freight, something that yesterday I would have said was not in my repertoire of credible dreams".[50] These symbolic acts of taking up space are combined with Carline asserting herself by learning to "look people in the face and speak when they stared on the street".[51] However, when she explains the attack to Lilian and says that she intends to visit Chalk for an unspecified amount of time, Lilian responds incredulously: "If you think you're going to get away from that shit in Texas, of all places, you're in one silly dream. If it's not fat, it's something else".[52] Carline and

[47] Ibid., 34.
[48] William Butler Yeats, *Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2008).
[49] Stinson, *Venus of Chalk*, 38.
[50] Ibid., 40.
[51] Ibid., 44.
[52] Ibid., 44.

Lilian represent two different approaches to a feeling of freedom and self-exploration: "[Lilian]… stood in front of people and let words pull things up from her deep places. I'm going to a deep place, I thought, but I'm a literal woman. I believe I'm going to get there on a bus".[53] Lilian as the poet, the teller of adventures, and Carline as the adventurer represent the interdependence between expressions of freedom and transgression on the page and in public space.

Carline's road journey is driven by a desire to retrace her history. The night before the trip, she pores over a map of the moon's surface and equates it with Chalk, suggesting it is similarly not of the world in which she is feeling ill at ease.[54] Looking over a map of the US, she is drawn to the places she knows from her childhood: "Far north in the Texas panhandle, I saw Dalhart in small dark type. The word looked as beautiful as it had on maps in my childhood, when it had meant a stop at the Dairy Queen on family trips".[55] These place names, Carline muses, "raised the ghost of myself as a child humming in the back of a station wagon as I watched a white moon".[56] Carline loses sight of the moon after the attack but in this memory it returns, suggesting the road will help her to regain a sense of place and belonging. The entwining imagery of the moon and the road suggests Carline's trip is not a retreat to the simpler and distant time of childhood to hide from a hostile environment but part of her larger quest for recovery.

Although Carline embarks on the journey to retrace her past, she also takes along objects to remind her of her current life. Even though Carline gives up her job working for the publisher *The Modern Homemaker*, she decides to write a new pamphlet called "How To Ride A Bus", turning the road trip into a familiar work

[53] Ibid., 41.
[54] Ibid., 47.
[55] Ibid., 47.
[56] Ibid., 47-48.

project.[57] This active link with the familiar is also apparent in her decision to take along several belongings that anchor her sense of self: a quilted curtain she has been finishing for Lilian, with a series of photographs of friends and family, "making Lilian a present of our lives".[58] Through the quilted photograph panels, the curtain is literally and symbolically an image of women's community. Feminist and women's literature scholar Lucy R. Lippard has identified the quilt as a key metaphor for women's creativity and culture.[59] Lucy R. Lippard writes that the quilt has become "the prime visual metaphor for women's lives, for women's culture" since second-wave feminism.[60] A "quilt is a diary of touch" that reveals "uniformity and disjunction" as well as "the diversity within monotony of women's routines".[61] In *Venus of Chalk* Carline's quilted curtain functions as a symbol of women's intergenerational connection, but one that incorporates both filiation and affiliation with the biological family alongside chosen families. Moreover, the quilt is a curtain and not a bedspread like traditional quilts, which one can use to close out the world and provide the delineations of the home. Yet Stinson tempers a romanticisation of domestic women's culture that the quilted curtain could represent by pairing it with a camp box Frankie made for Carline: "It would be a stable surface, hard to find on a

[57] Ibid., 49.
[58] Ibid., 51.
[59] Lucy R. Lippard writes in "Up, Down, and Across: A New Frame for Quilts" in Charlotte Robinson (ed) *The Artist and the Quilt* (New York: Knopf, 1983), 32-43. For more on the significance of the quilting metaphor for second-wave feminism see Elaine Showalter, "Piecing and Writing" in Nancy K. Miller (ed) *The Poetics of Gender* (New York: Columbia University Press), 222-47. Showalter argues that patchwork quilt-making is "the central figure for female literary creativity" and continues "the metaphor of piecing has been used as a model for the organization of language in the wild zone of the woman's text", 214, 224. According to Rachel Blau DuPlessis in *Writing Beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth-Century Women Writers* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), women's writing should strive to be "nonhierarchic … breaking hierarchical structures, making an even display of elements over the surface with no climactic place or moment, having the materials organized into many centers". In the "verbal quilt" of the feminist text, there is "no subordination, no ranking", 226-27.
[60] Lippard, "Up, Down, and Across", 32.
[61] Ibid., 32.

bus".[62] In pairing a traditional symbol of women's creativity and community with a symbol of outdoors adventure and mobility, Stinson signifies the importance of a connection to history with the freedoms of the present. In bringing these objects with her, Carline carries her history as she journeys forward. Retracing her history in this way is necessary to reclaim a positive sense of herself and a place that was lost, but it does not involve turning away from the present.

When Carline embarks on her road journey, Stinson subverts expectations of the road as a space of escape and freedom. Carline's road journey explores freedom as a retreat to childhood dynamics and the road as a potential site of rebirth, but Stinson frustrates this expectation for both Carline and the reader. This reflects Ann Brigham's argument in *American Road Narratives* (2015) which challenges the "liberatory" view of the road, judging that "mobility is not a method of freeing oneself from space, society, or identity but instead the opposite – a mode of engagement".[63] In Stinson's novel, the road is always a site of cultural and social interaction, if not conflict, as is the public space of the bus. The road is a reconstituted social arena that places Carline in inescapable contact with acquaintances and strangers. The road in *Venus of Chalk* therefore represents an intensification of Carline's self-surveillance and of her struggle with social space, and frustration of her psychological 'journey'. Similarly, to return to Holland, the road journey also signifies a Carline's psychological fantasy of childhood return that is constantly interrupted by reminders of social alienation and judgement, epitomised in moments of invisibility and hyper-visibility in public space.

When Carline begins the road trip with Tucker in the decommissioned bus, there is a gradual relaxation of social mores in that the bus changes from a public

[62] Stinson, *Venus of Chalk,* 51.
[63] Brigham, *American Road Narratives* (University of Virginia Press, 2015), 4.

space into a "renegade" space, untethered and undefined: "It was a shock to see that the bouncy initials of the transit authority had been painted over with hasty streaks of red paint, to match the stripe. The cartoon of a bus bent with speed, trailing light like a meteor was gone, too".[64] Divorced from its public service, its driver Tucker also changes from driver to acquaintance. This change in relations is illustrated when Tucker disembarks the bus and is wearing shorts instead of his usual work trousers: "He glanced back to grin at me, but the atmosphere in the empty bus was too intimate, already. I didn't smile back".[65] Beneath Carline's apprehension of this once-familiar commuter bus is the difficulty of negotiating space as a woman with a near stranger, which is reinforced when another man, Mel, also joins the bus trip: "I hadn't been planning on more than one man".[66] The road in *Venus of Chalk* is a space of continual negotiation over gender relations and Stinson maintains a sense of uncertainty for much of the novel.

As they continue on the road, the interior of the bus feels safer and homelier but the outside remains hostile. Carline looks out of the bus window and is confronted with messages about weight loss: "I stared at a car tilted on a roof as it flashed by just before a building painted with the words ZAP THE FAT".[67] In comparison, the experience of travel is a returning childlike freedom: "Mel lay flat on his back as we crossed the George Washington Bridge. 'I used to do this when I was a kid. Watching the girders makes you feel like you're on a Ferris wheel'".[68] Carline leans out of the bus window and lets her mouth "hang open, giving up all pretext of professional demeanour".[69] Between Carline and Mel's lolling around enjoying the emptiness of

[64] Stinson, *Venus of Chalk,* 52.
[65] Ibid., 53.
[66] Ibid., 55.
[67] Ibid., 60.
[68] Ibid., 60.
[69] Ibid., 60.

the bus and Tucker embarking on his photography hobby, Stinson explores how their road trip is partly about retracing old journeys and revisiting old family dynamics. The dynamic leads Carline to recall how her father would drive over uneven stretches of road to the delight of herself and her brothers: "He would make the station wagon fly over the dips, and my mother would say, 'Dwight,' while my brothers and I bounced and screamed".[70] By focusing on a fraternal sibling formation instead of a paternal, maternal or sisterly bond, Stinson explores the return to childlike freedom and experience of gendered space while distancing pre-/oedipal psychoanalytic readings and feminist readings.

As Carline gets closer to Chalk, the road as a fantasy of a return to childhood is intertwined with a denial of her sexuality and a flight into conventionality and normativity. The first overt example of Carline's retreat into convention appears when they stop at a gas station restaurant called Gravy's after passing through the Appalachian Mountains. Earlier on in the novel Carline chooses to withhold information about Lilian and her sexuality in a conversation with Mel, instead choosing anonymity and obscurity. When Carline enters the building with Mel, she experiences a flush of pleasure when a young child bounces a ball near them and her mother encourages the child to apologise. Carline is "ridiculously pleased" at this friendly exchange until she realises this friendliness is partially because in being with Mel she is "passing for straight".[71] As Carline and Mel sit down, she begins to perform actions that are reminiscent of Frankie's home rather than her own. Carline notes how she rarely has coffee, and does not take sugar at all, but "[n]ow I ripped open a packet of sugar, poured it into my spoon, then stirred it in the glass, just as

[70] Ibid., 62.
[71] Ibid., 75.

Frankie would do".[72] When Tucker arrives, Carline asks them to say grace before eating, "another gesture from my Aunt's table" and thinks, "My family used to pray at meals on holidays and vacations, but I felt crazy, faking it with unwilling men".[73] In this roadside restaurant, Carline finds that her experience of fat prejudice is lessened, suggesting the intersections between sexuality and fatness as a sign of sinful excess:[74] "In the company of plain-faced men, even the fact that I was fat seemed to be coming across as normal".[75] Carline finds that her fatness is more accepted, and less a sign of excess, when she is perceived to be a heterosexual woman. Carline's nostalgic return to the conventions of her family comes at the price of hiding other parts of who she is.

Carline's flight into (hetero)normativity at this stage in the novel leaves her feeling insubstantial. While the social invisibility of fat, heterosexual girls in fiction has been explored at length in this thesis, in *Venus of Chalk* Carline's experience of invisibility is specifically related to the assumption of her heterosexuality. The ghosting of lesbian characters is a recurring motif in fictional depictions dating back to the eighteenth century, as Terry Castle argues in *The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture* (1993), which speaks to the repression and "derealisation" of lesbianism and lesbian stories. Castle argues that lesbian characters have been ghosted – negated, disembodied, and denied – in culture and history, even when "the great unspoken theme" is lesbianism: "the sexual love for women exists within the repressive framework of the fiction only as a haunting chimera, as that

[72] Ibid., 76.
[73] Ibid., 77.
[74] As the earlier chapters in this thesis show, the relationship between sexuality and fatness has primarily been explored through heterosexuality, and an emerging sexual life after weight loss is achieved. Wally Lamb's *She's Come Undone* (London: Simon and Schuster, 1992) includes a lesbian sexual relationship between Dolores and a janitor called Dotty, but this experience is fleeting and a partial catalyst for Dolores's psychological breakdown and attempted suicide. Lamb depicts her lesbian experience as a result of her lack of ability to read her desires when she is fat (therefore her lesbian experience becomes evidence of her sexual and emotional immaturity). Dolores's lesbian experience is also related to a perceived lack of heterosexual options and a history of male violence, which is clear when Dolores loses weight because she never explores same-sex romance or sex again.
[75] Stinson, *Venus of Chalk,* 77.

which, by definition, may be sensed but never *seen*".[76] In *Venus of Chalk,* Carline begins to feel increasingly ghostly when "passing for straight", signalling distress and anger at self-erasure and feelings of complicity in her closeting. While earlier on Carline briefly embraces the mythology of the road and fantasies about being large and mobile like the bus – "The flight wasn't special, but as I fitted my spirit to match my container, the shape of it was. I was short and boxy in a renegade city bus on the sleek drift of the road" – her experiences of the road in actuality make her feel increasingly invisible.[77] Stinson is writing in the twenty-first century where lesbian relationships have been represented in media and culture on an unprecedented level since the 1990s, but in drawing upon a history of lesbian erasure she connects it to a larger web of erasure and spectacle that Carline experiences as a fat lesbian woman. For Stinson, these bodily experiences are intertwined in Carline's struggles with her body and determine her experience of social acceptance. For instance, she may be accepted in one form as a fat woman yet invisible in another her experience of social acceptance (as a lesbian).

A psychoanalytic reading of earlier novels like *Lady Oracle* and *She's Come Undone* might posit that these fictions are anchored by a sexual conflict in the form of an oral psychosexual struggle between mother and daughter. By depicting issues with queer visibility at the heart of Carline's journey, Stinson engages differently with the idea, and even expectation and desire, to see a sexual conflict at the heart of a narrative about fatness. Instead of a personal and familial sexual conflict, Stinson depicts a sexual conflict that is distinctly based in queer and fat experience in social space. She transforms the sexual conflict into overtly social terms. For example, Carline's ghosting occurs shortly after she finishes her meal and goes to the restaurant

[76] Terry Castle, *The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture* (New York: Columbia University, 1993), 15 emphasis in the original.
[77] Stinson, *Venus of Chalk*, 71-72.

bathroom and undresses to have a wash. She imagines herself as disembodied, detached from the arm she burnt: "For a moment, I felt as though I were seeing it through a bus window as I rode swiftly somewhere else. When I touched it to wash, though, it was part of me again, hurting. I couldn't drive away from the burn".[78] Carline begins to inspect her body, focusing on the details of her skin, "muted cherry vanilla, rippled with stretch marks and veins, flecked with hairs".[79] Carline's focus on her body in this episode is not an exploration in self-loathing, but rather the need to prove she is still there. Carline wishes Lilian was with her in the cubicle to ask her if there is "meaning in my sensation that, damp under this bare bulb in this West Virginia restroom, I was whiter than I remembered".[80] Carline's anxiety that she has become "whiter" reflects her increasing feeling of insubstantiality and suggests the violent and immediate cost of even inadvertent passing. Significantly, Carline seeks reassurance of her materiality from Lilian who always "drew stares" but who knows her "body and mind".[81] Carline wishes Lilian were there because she is her partner and a fellow lesbian, whose presence would reassure her of their collective materiality.

For Carline, then, the road's promise of anonymity and as a fantasy of a return to childhood is disrupted by tensions with passing and closeting. While initially "enjoying a reprieve from conspicuousness" by passing for straight, she quickly realises that this is a negative freedom that offers a freedom from prejudice, and not the freedom to exist as herself. When she exits the bathroom, Carline is furious at her invisibility and finds herself overcome with anger: "I was suffering from the cumulative effect of everybody in Gravy's acting as if I looked ordinary. It was like

[78] Ibid., 78.
[79] Ibid., 78.
[80] Ibid., 78.
[81] Ibid., 77.

what they said on nature shows about coming up from a deep sea dive too fast. I had the bends".[82] This description of submergence resonates with Holland's reflection that fantasies related to the oral stage of development appear as "fantasies of losing the boundaries of self, of being engulfed, overwhelmed, drowned, or devoured".[83] While Holland draws on distressing images in this list, he also reflects "these fantasies can also be of a benevolent merger or fusion, as when Chaucer's bridegroom get a 'bath of blisse'".[84] The comparison to a deep sea expedition suggests, therefore, that the welcoming, friendly restaurant is a fantasy of social acceptance that Carline has submerged herself in and from which she is now emerging. In reality, this underworld space is an environment that might otherwise be inhospitable and unfriendly towards her. In this reading of water imagery, Carline's pleasure in a fantasy of sameness (a subconscious fantasy of oral satisfaction, where differences between self and other disappear) is disrupted through a confrontation with difference (recognition of herself as a social subject, sometimes unaccepted as an openly queer and fat individual).

In contrast to *Lady Oracle* and *She's Come Undone*, in which fat characters reach breaking point through the death of a loved one (Joan's Aunt Lou, Dolores's mother), Carline's breaking point is the moment of her ghosting and the erasure of her difference. Part of Carline's sudden anger is the feeling that either way rejection is inevitable: "Being fat was not uncommon, but it marked me. People let me know that they hated my shape. Strangers might simply be cold or they might throw trash. If it didn't happen here, it would happen down the road. Passing or praying would not stop that".[85] Carline rejects the acceptance she could have passing as a straight, fat woman, and acts out an uncharacteristic sign of aggression. Violent acts often accompany

[82] Ibid., 79.
[83] Holland, *The Dynamics of Literary Response* (Oxford University Press, 1968), 35.
[84] Ibid., 35.
[85] Ibid., 79.

breaking points in depictions of fatness, such as Dolores's attempted suicide in the lake of Cape Cod, and the shallow cut Joan receives from her mother when she stabs her in the arm with a knife. Carline's violent altercation involves her spilling salt and pepper across a table, an act the waitress does not register as intentional: "I must have looked upset. 'Don't worry about it, sweetheart,' she said before she hurried away, wiping pepper from her hands".[86] Carline attempts to be seen as the disruptive presence she feels she is but it appears comical, especially because no one is aware of this public act of disobedience. Yet it also signifies a positive step forward for Carline because she does not turn this anger on herself and signifies her rejection of the terms under which she will be most easily accepted.

Carline's struggle to lose herself in fantasy and desire to reconnect with a previous contentment with her body is clear when the trio stays at a motel for the night. After an evening of playing family games with Mel and Tucker, Carline cannot keep the present at bay by thinking about the past for long. Thinking of the "nameless mistakes" she made at the restaurant, Carline is kept awake by her recent experiences of social surveillance and rejection, epitomised in the image of the burn: "Throbbing with worry and covered with sweat, I began to feel as if my body were one big blister. If that wasn't true, then people looked at me with blistered eyes".[87] Carline goes to the motel pool for a midnight swim. Swimming naked and alone in the still night, she finds a space on the road where she can feel a sense of the freedom she has been seeking. If read in relation to water and submergence as a sublimated oral fantasy in Holland's terms, in the pool Carline experiences a moment of physical and subconscious pleasure based in her body, rather than the erasure of herself in the diner:

[86] Ibid., 79.
[87] Ibid., 88.

> I got close enough to touch the bottom, pocked and studded with gravel that floated between my fingers. It might have been the surface of the moon. I did a sprawling handstand, then rose like a cork, gasping and laughing as I broke the surface. The sky blurred like the view out a fast window. The bug lamp crackled. I was weightless.[88]

In the pool, Carline experiences a perfect moment of unselfconscious bodily autonomy and joyous movement. The pool and its gravelly floor remind Carline of the moon she lost sight of on the night she was attacked by the neighbourhood boys. In the pool, she delves deep into its reflection, feeling a sense of liberation by pushing her body to its physical limit, doing handstands underwater but feeling "weightless". Stinson again expands the typical linguistic framework around fat bodies to include images of strength, power, and pleasure. Carline's legs "freed themselves in water" and, as she swims length after length, she "rippled like a curtain knowing wind".[89] Carline's euphoria and physical liberation in the pool reaffirms a reconnection to self that she finds in a different form in the intergenerational quilted curtain she is making for Lilian (as suggested in the return of the curtain metaphor). The description is one of energy and joy that is made more powerful because of Carline's previous anxiety about how and in what way she takes up space at all.

After Carline exhausts herself, she exits the pool and lies down naked on the poolside. Stinson's depiction of Carline's nude body is reminiscent of self-portraits by Laura Aguilar, a photography series Stinson praises in a non-fiction article "Nothing Succeeds like Excess: corporate greed Goes Unchecked in a Fat-Phobic Society" (2001). In this article, Stinson claims, "If women are to have the courage and imagination to move towards economic justice, we need the courage and imagination

[88] Ibid., 89.
[89] Ibid., 89.

to see fat bodies differently. Artists are ready to help".[90] Stinson cites Aguilar's use of imagery and form as one example of the way artists can move toward this aim: "In *Nature Self-Portrait No. 4*, by photographer Laura Aguilar, a nude fat woman is stretched at the edge of a small pool. The shapes her breasts and belly make are curved, abundant and calmly reflected in the echoing curve of the water. She is clearly part of a world in which she belongs".[91] Stinson depicts Carline's body, like Aguilar's, as part of the landscape, celebrating its materiality and harmony rather than its figurative meanings. Stinson's description of Carline's body in the novel draws on Aguilar's self-portrait in several ways. Firstly, Carline is depicted in the same position as Aguilar; she is resting on her side, with one hand underneath her head and one arm resting along her hip. They are both stretched out on the ground "rimmed with shallow puddles".[92] Their breasts and belly drip, "innocent as rocks".[93] Even the reference to rocks is an allusion to Aguilar's image though she is not at the side of a motel pool but in the middle of a natural shallow pool in a rocky terrain.

Stinson's homage to Aguilar's art is an example of how she recovers an otherwise all too easily lost canon of fat depictions. The works of Atwood and Lamb are significant moments in the history of fat fictional representations but the novels do not connect to or engage directly with other creative or cultural works on fatness. For example, Lamb's *She's Come Undone* mirrors the plot points and relationships in Atwood's *Lady Oracle* in several key ways but Lamb has never alluded to Atwood's novel as an influence or intertextual inspiration. Lamb may not have read Atwood's novel prior to writing *She's Come Undone* but the larger lack of awareness of the recent literary history of fatness in fiction is itself something in which Stinson

[90] Stinson, "Nothing succeeds like excess: corporate greed goes unchecked in a fat-phobic society" *Women's Review of Books* 18 (2001), 17.
[91] Ibid., 17.
[92] Stinson, *Venus of Chalk*, 90.
[93] Ibid., 90.

intervenes. Dolores's engagement with feminist texts and ideas begins and ends with *Our Bodies, Ourselves* (1971), and Lamb does not bring any other cultural or critical works into Dolores's world, such as Susie Orbach's bestseller *Fat is a Feminist Issue* (1978), or *Shadow on a Tightrope: Writings by Women on Fat Oppression* (1983) edited by Lisa Schoenfielder and Barb Wieser.[94] Atwood's lack of allusions to works on fatness is more understandable because *Lady Oracle* was published in 1976 and before fat was a widely debated topic for feminists or a subject of feminist fiction, and because Atwood was writing in Canada while the fat acceptance movement remained far more active in the US. As outlined in Chapter One, fat activism emerged in Canada in the 1980s. Susie Orbach's *Fat is a Feminist Issue* brought attention to the intersection of gender and size as social issues across transnational platforms, but this was published two years following Atwood.[95] By drawing attention to the lack of intertextual connections in these earlier novels I do not mean to suggest that the works of Atwood and Lamb reflect a knowing and intentional cultural forgetting of previous fat representations, but I do mean to emphasise that Stinson's decision to engage with previous depictions of fatness in art and literature is a meaningful development in fat fiction.

While Stinson draws on the harmony depicted in Aguilar's size-positive art, Carline's *mise-en-scène* takes on a different message when it is interrupted by the intrusive gaze of Tucker who takes a photograph of Carline as she lies nude at the side of the pool and without her permission: "I heard a click, and lifted my head to see Tucker between the palms, leaning over the fence with his camera. The lens was

[94] Lisa Schoenfielder and Barb Wieser (eds) *Shadow on a Tightrope: Writings by Women on Fat Oppression* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books), 54-55.
[95] Orbach, *Fat is a Feminist Issue* (Paddington Press, 1978).

turned to me".[96] In contrast to *Nature Self-Portrait No. 4* that involves photographer Aguilar turning the camera lens towards herself to share a moment of nakedness and vulnerability, Carline is the unwilling and unknowing subject of someone else's lens. The pleasure, in both social and psychosexual terms, that Carline finds in the pool by losing her sense of difference between herself and the world is interrupted. Whereas Aguilar's nude "is clearly part of a world in which she belongs", Tucker's photograph is an act of violation.[97] Stinson's reimagining of *Nature Self- Portrait No. 4* as a scene of vulnerability and violation speaks to the ideas underpinning *Venus of Chalk*. Whereas Carline feels the weight of lesbian ghosting in the restaurant, in the motel pool she feels the pain of being a "freak show" spectacle.[98] Carline gets back in the pool and acts like the spectacle she feels Tucker has made of her: "I pushed to the shallow end and stood up in the heavy air. I grabbed my belly with both hands and shook it at him. I was too mad to be ashamed. 'Did you see this? Want a picture?'".[99] Tucker explains that he only took Carline's picture because he likes observing people, particularly his passengers on the bus who he imagines he knows well enough to invite them to come together as housemates "in an apartment building I plan to own".[100] Carline points out Tucker's hypocrisy, arguing that "[y]ou think you see people's whole lives, but what you really see are surfaces".[101] For Carline, an integral part of Tucker's desire to capture her image is the power imbalance.[102] Carline's fantasy of a rediscovered fraternal connection on the road is destroyed, ultimately serving to reinforce her social status as outcast and spectacle. In Carline's

[96] Stinson, *Venus of Chalk,* 90.
[97] Susan Stinson, "Nothing succeeds like excess: corporate greed goes unchecked in a fat-phobic society", 17.
[98] Stinson, *Venus of Chalk,* 91.
[99] Ibid., 90-91.
[100] Ibid., 91.
[101] Ibid., 92.
[102] Ibid., 92.

confrontation of Tucker, the creative artist fascinated with the "human pageant" of life, Stinson gives voice to the fat woman-made-spectacle, such as the freak show fat lady, who has historically been left visible but voiceless.[103] In particular she criticises the complicity of well-meaning artists who depict fat women's bodies for the purported purpose of art but end up reinforcing their exploitation as "spectacle".[104]

In the twists and turns of the novel, this episode represents an intensification of Carline's issues as a lesbian fat woman rather than an escape from social reality. For Carline, the bus becomes a hostile and alienating environment similar to the street where she was harassed, and she ultimately ends up leaving to walk the rest of the way to the nearest town. While Ronald Primeau argues that the road trip "suspends for a while definition according to one's origins, profession, and geography", this is not the case for Carline.[105] Moreover, the journey is not an escape from her profession but a recommitment to it through the creation of the "How To Ride a Bus" pamphlet. Carline's bus journey reaffirms her as an outsider through her invisibility as a lesbian and hyper-visibility in the motel pool. If Primeau is right that going on the road typically releases travellers from the forces that have shaped them, in *Venus of Chalk* the bus journey becomes an inversion of freedom, independence and escape and, in some ways, a parody of the purported liberatory potential of the road.

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[103] Andrea Stulman Dennett in "The Dime Museum Freak Show Reconfigured as Talk Show" in Rosemarie Garland Thomson (ed) *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body* (New York: New York University Press, 1996). The continued fascination with bodies rendered abnormal and sensational has inspired women writers to recover "extraordinary" freak show women as subjects with voices, and engage with the history of women as spectacle. For example, Margaret Atwood, *Lady Oracle* (London: Virago, 1982 [1976]), Angela Carter, *Nights at the Circus* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1984), and Katherine Dunn, *Geek Love* (New York: Random House, 1989).

[104] Elana Dykewomon in "In Search of the Fabled Fat Woman" has noted how literary representations of fatness tend to reflect psychological distress and broader cultural diseases which she argues contribute to distrust and apprehension around fat in the literary imagination: "As a reader, I find it increasingly difficult to trust writers", 1-3.

[105] Primeau, *Romance of the Road* (Bowling Green State University Press, 1996), 69.

It is the roadside as opposed to the road, and walking as opposed to being driven, that forms the backdrop to Carline's most significant self-discoveries. The toil of walking is reminiscent of the toil of swimming, and Carline begins to gain a similar feeling of freedom: "I wished the corn would hold me if I cast myself out into the field to swim. I could imagine pulling myself through the air by grasping ear after ear, immersed in heat and the tall rustle of the stiff, green leaves".[106] Alone, she cannot escape revisiting her current problems and achieves perspective on her recent troubles now she is bereft of distractions. Of Tucker's spying Carline ultimately recognises that his photograph can only do to her that which she has already experienced: "A picture was just a stare, held down and slicked over. I had been suffering under stares, lately; feeling them like touches, like cuts".[107] On the roadside, Carline begins to move past the event and return to the event that began her recent compulsion to return to Chalk: "It had started, I believed, with the shouts of boys who were calling me something I was. Fat. The small flames they had thrown were nothing, but I had caught like dry brush".[108] Carline realises that even the attack by the boys was a veil over the truth, which is her own self-hatred despite her size-positive, feminist and openly lesbian identity. She realises that her problem is that she looks at herself as "a flaw in the perfectible world" which has led to her desperate situation, but that it need not stay this way: "I was ready to give up worrying about how Tucker's lens had seen me… Nothing turned on size or sexuality here except my state of mind".[109] While Carline does not know Tucker's motivations for taking the photograph or what he intends to do with it, she realises she can control how much power she affords to the malicious acts and thoughts of others. In the slow progress of walking, Carline gets

[106] Ibid., 98.
[107] Ibid., 99-100.
[108] Ibid., 101.
[109] Ibid., 101.

distance from her social condition that does not involve her escaping into the past and engaging in fantasy but perceiving her present circumstances.

Physical weariness has a therapeutic benefit for Carline. While Lamb's *She's Come Undone* reflects psychoanalytic theory and therapeutic methods to the point of parody in Dolores's unusual reparenting, Stinson avoids therapy altogether and focuses on the holistic benefits of physical exertion. Between her own exhaustion and road kill, Carline is unable to escape bodies on the road, "especially not [her] own": "The pain in my feet led my thoughts away from the fading burn on my wrist, but the situation as a whole took me back to it".[110] Carline connects a series of disparate events in her life to create a picture of her past and present:

> I was walking toward Chalk, toward Frankie in mourning, trying to place my reactions to being taunted about being fat on a map that located my tender-skinned childhood, aspiring maturity and displaced immediate present on a grid drawn to scale with the lives, desires, bodies, fights and deaths of road kill, family friends, intrusive bus drivers and everyone else.[111]

On the lonely roadside Carline gains a broader perspective to incorporate the violating and petty attacks on her autonomy, and begins to let her "feeling of shame that self-harm and fat" fall away.[112] Stinson does not present Carline discovering the "patterns" of her behaviour in the same way that therapeutic episodes reveal for Dolores in particular, but this episode does suggest that Carline is left with the conviction to face uncomfortable and difficult realities. While Atwood and Lamb parody and destabilise the myth of transformational change in the downward spirals and self-deception of Joan and Dolores, Stinson refuses it altogether by depicting Carline's breakthrough as an orientation towards self-analysis and reflection rather than evidence of a stark and

[110] Ibid., 101.
[111] Ibid., 101.
[112] Ibid., 102.

sudden change. With cautious optimism, Carline describes moving on to start on a real, but also figurative, "new road": "Bursting over the top, I was red-faced and gleaming. I stumbled over a low cable onto a cement two-lane with trees tight on each side. Leaning hands on my thighs, I gulped air in the middle of the new road".[113] At the end of Carline's road adventure she does not arrive at her destination, but faces a continuation of her journey. It will take two more car rides and a train to get to Frankie's doorstep in Chalk.

Carline's return to her childhood summer home resonates with an idea that Ann Brigham has posited that the "mysterious adventure" in road narratives of the 2000s is often centred on the "return of/to the family". Analysing three road films and one road novel, Brigham argues that the family in road narratives becomes a motif for comprehending loss and recovering purpose following 9/11. Brigham reveals how 2000s road narratives break down the duality between the domestic space and the family versus the road and adventure because recovering a sense of family becomes the central quest: "Rather than opposing a 'mysterious adventure' on the road, the return to the family becomes the 'mysterious adventure' of the road".[114] This "outward search" for the domestic space is anchored in the family becoming strange and unstable: "Depending on the text, either the cause or revelation of this search revolves around the appearance of the family as the unfamiliar".[115] *Venus of Chalk* is another 2000s road narrative that depicts a return of/to the defamiliarised family. While the road saw Mel and Tucker, the unfamiliar travellers, become familiar in Carline's repeated association of them with her brothers, when Carline arrives at Frankie's the tension between the familiar and the unfamiliar reaches its apex as

[113] Ibid., 102.
[114] Brigham, *American Road Narratives* (University of Virginia Press, 2015), 188.
[115] Ibid., 199.

Carline discovers more about Frankie's relationship with Ida. To return to Holland, the de-familiarisation of Frankie's home also has some intriguing implications if considered through a psychoanalytic lens. On a subliminal level, for Carline the discovery of Frankie's erotic life contributes to a fresh feeling of jealousy, neglect and betrayal at having to share her mother figure's love. Carline's memory of home and psychosexual desires are shaken by this suggestion of a new sexual undercurrent.

Carline's experience back at her summer home represents a latent and manifest conflict: a latent drama around parental nurturing and feelings of betrayal, and a complex social and political story about queerness, southern identity and norms, and generational differences. The sublimation of this latent conflict in such social dramas maximises the pleasure of the reader as Stinson begins to resolve these dramas in the final part of the novel. Stinson's novel reflects Holland's argument that the texts readers most enjoy reflect a hedonistic economy in which the psychoanalytic and social and political content feed into each other, resulting in "multiple bonuses of pleasure":

> In life, defences stand off and modify desires and so cut down the amount of pleasure we get even if the drives are gratified. If however, the defense itself gives pleasure, there is an increase in pleasure, and that increase in pleasure (according to Freud) buys a permit for 'a still greater pleasure arising from deeper psychical sources,' the gratification from the drive (or, in literature, unconscious content). Thus, even the pleasure from satisfying the drive becomes greater. It is as though a kind of multiplier came into play like those in economics, so that a little pleasure in form releases a far greater pleasure in content.[116]

In Holland's terms, Stinson's novel could be considered the most 'satisfying' text in this thesis for its social and psychological themes precisely because it balances both

[116] Holland, *The Dynamics of Literary Response*, 132.

the social and political themes of fat acceptance and queer identity alongside a psychological subplot around the body and the mother. In doing so, Stinson evokes a psychoanalytic subplot to explore and enhance enjoyment in more radical and complex fat-positive themes. Rather than viewing this as purely reinvesting in psychological conceptions of fatness, Stinson uses a familiar narrative story of fatness to create belief and investment in this new story of fatness: "our so-called 'identification' with a literary character is actually a complicated mixture of projection and introjection . . . needless to say, we do not just incorporate a character's drives and defenses – we incorporate the whole character, clothes, features, manners, physique, and the rest".[117] This investment converts unfamiliar social and political ideas into familiar psychological pleasures and desires.

When Carline first arrives at Frankie's home in Chalk, her former summer home is described as comforting and unchanging. To Carline, Frankie and her home are ports in a storm. Carline remembers how Frankie took her to Padre Island after her mother's death, where they reminisced over her mother's childhood: "We had cried on the beach with t-shirts and shorts over our swimsuits among drunken college students on spring break".[118] After Ida's death, Carline's trip to her Aunt's home offers a chance for Frankie, but also herself, to heal. The domestic space of her Aunt's home allows Carline to be comforted in the familiar. Even though Carline has been away for many years, she describes how the clothes she borrows from Frankie fit "like my own name" and explains that the décor of Frankie's guest room is the same as it was: "I recognised the fringed bedspread, the vanity and the lamp all with a shock of familiar feeling".[119] While the road enables Carline to engage in a

[117] Ibid., 278.
[118] Stinson, *Venus of Chalk*, 105.
[119] Ibid., 106.

performance of domesticity and fantasy of childhood, it is only when she reaches Frankie's that she reaches a space that can fulfil her need to immerse herself in the past.

Carline's return to Frankie's home reflects a need to reconnect with her personal and regional southern history to ground herself. As Carline attempts to comfort Frankie unhappiness over Ida's impersonal funeral, in a comedic turn, the chair slowly collapses beneath her. Carline gazes up at her Aunt in awe and belonging: "As I looked up at the familiar crescent of her belly and the globes of her breasts, I thought of generations of women in my family fighting household insects and observing deaths. There was nothing to do but take my place among them".[120] With her breasts like "globes" and a stomach like a "crescent" (returning to the imagery of the moon), Frankie appears like a large and majestic Venus of Willendorf. In *Dirt and Desire: Reconstructing Southern Women's Writing, 1930-1990* (2000), Patricia Yaeger argues that the gargantuan woman's body is a recurring motif in southern women's writing that is evoked to make visible the sexist and racist myth-making behind the image of the diminutive southern lady in need of protection. Focusing on the fiction of Eudora Welty, Yaeger reveals how the southern giantess is often depicted as a destablising figure in the community that produces both fascination and derision, and in flouting stereotypes of southern womanhood the large woman character also suffers some punishing social consequences. In reversing the stereotype of the southern lady in need of protection, these heroines help bring the "hard facts of southern racism and sexism into focus".[121] In *Venus of Chalk* Frankie does not expose social violence; instead she is a figure that embodies a familial and

[120] Ibid., 107.
[121] Patricia Yaeger, *Dirt and Desire: Reconstructing Southern Women's Writing, 1930-1990* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2000), 129.

woman-centric southern history that beckons Carline, a fellow large woman. However, the comedy also undercuts a straightforwardly sincere interpretation. As she sits on the floor Carline mirrors her childhood self being cradled on Frankie's lap as she struggles to breathe from asthma (in another clear image of Frankie as a mother figure), but now she is an adult sitting on the floor only through bad luck and her own actions. Carline's myth-making around Frankie is in this sense a projection that reveals the sense of place and history, as well as maternal connection, that Carline needs at this moment.

The nostalgic familiarity of the domestic space and desire to reconnect with a parental figure is destablised when she realises her Aunt has been in a relationship with Ida. As Carline peels potatoes in Frankie's kitchen, the nature of their relationship dawns on her: "Suddenly, it was obvious: Frankie and Ida had been lovers. I shut off the faucet, but kept pushing the scruffy against the potato's disappearing skin. I should have seen".[122] The realisation of Frankie and Ida's love affair contradicts her image of her childhood home and her Aunt as absent of "an erotic life".[123] That this realisation occurs in the kitchen while Carline is preparing food is symbolic because this is a site of women's culture and connection, yet it is in this space that Carline faces her lack of knowledge of and intimacy with her Aunt. Overwhelmed by her own lack of perception, Carline interrupts the meal preparation by biting into a potato: "For just a moment, a kind of grief matched the gagged feeling and the bitter taste".[124] While food is a consciously joyful and pleasurable activity in *Venus of Chalk*, Carline's compulsion to bite into the raw potato is an instance where emotional upheaval and food are intertwined to suggest a fissure in the women's

[122] Stinson, *Venus of Chalk*, 110.
[123] Ibid., 111.
[124] Ibid., 111.

connections and, on a latent level, reflect a challenge to her desired return to a nurturing maternal relationship. Nevertheless, Stinson also suggests this rupture is open to recovery as Carline continues to prepare the family meal: "I cut the bite marks out of the one on the counter. I should have thrown it away, but, instead, I prepared it for the meal".[125] Carline is not consumed *by* her emotions, like Joan and Dolores who binge-eat when upset; instead she digests her emotions and the new knowledge about Frankie in the act of cooking and dining with her family.

Carline attempts to reconcile the image of her Aunt as a figure of southern womanhood with this sexual identity. While Frankie is on her tractor, Carline looks up at Frankie and her body with a new significance: "I looked up at her thick thighs and hips, her sunburn and strong hands as if everything had new meaning, as if it were all a code".[126] Carline projects onto Frankie a lesbian past that she wants to connect with and collapse into her own sense of self and identity. In *Venus of Chalk*, Carline's desire for queer belonging and community as represented through Frankie's declaration of her own sexual identity could be considered, on a latent level, as another manifestation of nurturing and care that, when refused, Carline experiences as an act of withholding. For example, when Carline and Frankie row to the middle of a pond in an old boat Carline confronts Frankie about not coming out to her and looks for confirmation of her Aunt's lesbianism: "I moved the bandana away from Frankie's mouth, too, so it hung damply across the bridge of her nose. She swatted at my hand without opening her eyes. 'I talked about her a lot'".[127] Frankie indirectly confirms that she and Ida had a romantic relationship but does not adopt the language that Carline uses to speak about her sexuality and relationships, and does not identify

[125] Ibid., 111.
[126] Ibid., 111.
[127] Ibid., 113.

herself as a lesbian: "'I told you Ida and I used to go on long drives in the Mercury, looking at crops and making plans. She had a family at home, but she was reckless in that car".[128] Carline's need to make sense of this lesbian history conflicts with Frankie's desire for privacy and to grieve the loss of Ida.[129] The episode concludes with the Aunt and niece embracing but Carline feeling unsatisfied: "I kissed her back, feeling both joined and far from her".[130] Although Carline wants confirmation that Frankie is like her, giving her another connection to self and identity, Frankie does not or can not give this to her. This is reinforced by the setting of this conversation, with Carline and Frankie floating in a boat on a small lake. If submergence into water represents the temporary fulfilment of an oral psychosexual fantasy where the distinctions between oneself and others are blurred, Carline and Frankie are floating above a deeper and more fulfilling connection, for Carline at least, but do not take the plunge. By depicting Carline's frustration with Frankie's lack of verbal affirmation of her queerness, Stinson unites Carline's latent desire for nurturing with a political and social affirmation of their collective lesbian identity.

Instead of discovering a secret queer community, Carline discovers similar struggles of lesbian presence and ghosting as she did on the road. While there are spaces adjacent to the home where Frankie and Ida's relationship can be more open, and more openly discussed (such as Ida's car and the small pond), this openness does not translate into the home and struggles to be articulated in the community. When Mel and Tucker arrive at Frankie's at the same time as the Library Guild this tension is played out when Carline feels unsettled again by the drama of the road brought

[128] Ibid., 113.
[129] Ibid., 113.
[130] Ibid., 115.

back to Chalk. Mel and Tucker seem to be from "another world,"[131] or her other life, which means Carline is left straddling two worlds, especially when the men join them for lunch in the kitchen. Mel and Tucker's presence as outsiders brings to the surface an absence of language to describe Frankie's loss when Tucker asks about Ida. Even though Carline notes that the Guild, itself a gargantuan southern body that moves and feels together,[132] would know about Frankie and Ida's closeness, there is "a long moment of strained silence" and Frankie's relationship with Ida is left unexpressed: "The closest thing to acknowledgement was the fact that nobody started to eat again until Frankie picked up her fork".[133] Tucker's question reveals the bind between customs of discretion and mourning when it also doubles as a form of denial and erasure. When Carline attends the Library Guild meeting she is overwhelmed with a simultaneous feeling of both lesbian presence and absence: "Looking around the room, I felt stirrings of recognition. For an instant, I was certain that they were a bunch of dykes, then I am unsure of everyone, including me".[134] This secret queer relationship contests the home as a space of women's containment and reveals a transgressive sexual undercurrent, but it also reveals that it is a space in which, to Carline, Frankie struggles to have her relationship acknowledged and commemorated for what it was.

The domestic space produces an anxiety of lesbian ghosting for Carline similar to that she experiences on the road, and she attempts to transform past scenes

[131] Ibid., 118.
[132] The Library Guild represents another gargantuan southern body that appears to Carline as a single entity that moves and feels together. Carline describes feeling scared of the Guild as a child because the room they were in seemed to heave with emotion: "I was a little afraid of the Library Guild. Sometimes as a girl, I had heard shouting or sobbing coming from meetings in the living room", Stinson, *Venus of Chalk*, 107. In Frankie's kitchen the Guild again appears to Carline as a connected body that grieves together: "I had known most of these women all of my life. Even their smallest gestures, finger taps on arms to alert each other to the arrival of the gravy boat, stirred recognition in me. I could see that they were grieving", 122.
[133] Ibid., 122.
[134] Ibid., 128.

of violence into sites of connection and even defiance. In Frankie's garage Carline recalls her last summer in Chalk and her feelings of self-loathing and self-doubt over her body and sexuality. In an overt signal to a mother-daughter conflict, she remembers how she felt "jealous and deserted" because Frankie began spending a lot of time with Ida, and began self-harming through secret food restriction across a period of months. Carline's disordered eating, Stinson suggests, is in relation to feelings of betrayal and neglect due to a competitor in her Aunt's affections. The dieting culminates in a more violent act of self-harm where she crushes her finger in Frankie's garage with a vice. Carline realises she cannot make sense of her identity through pain anymore: "I had given up dieting and cutting in the same shaky breath. I had decided to join my body and face my fears. Standing in Frankie's shed all these years later, I made the same decision again".[135] Instead of escaping this time, Carline climbs on top of Ida's car and swings on a rope in a display of bodily autonomy: "… I clenched the rope, held in air by the full grasp of my body, much stronger and more fluent than a vise".[136] As Carline revisits the scene of her last self-inflicted wound and rewrites it as one of physical ecstasy, it is also meaningful that it takes place above Ida's Mercury, where Ida's relationship with Frankie took its most public form. Carline notes that, "If Ida had a ghost, I imagined that this was where she would be".[137] Carline's display is in defiance of a painful personal past and a historical past of lesbian erasure. Scenes of past violence towards queer bodies (in the garage) are turned into spaces of defiance and queer visibility, if not connection.

Stinson further explores how relationships to queer visibility are marked by generational differences when Frankie connects with Mel instead of Carline over

[135] Stinson, *Venus of Chalk,* 135.
[136] Ibid., 136.
[137] Ibid., 136.

Ida's cherished possessions (claiming the emotional intimacy that Carline covets subconsciously). Carline catches Mel, a secret cross-dresser, taking one of Ida's dresses out of storage (symbolically taking both himself and Ida out of the closet). Carline rebukes him for violating Frankie's trust by snooping, but she lingers with the dress on the way back to the closet: "With a serious look on his face, he smoothed it over his knee. Feeling complicit, I unsnapped a rhinestone cuff. Mel shifted on the bed, pulling more of the skirt toward him".[138] The dress presents queer possibilities for both Mel and Carline, even though they are drawn to it for different reasons (Mel for its glamorous femininity, Carline for its proximity to Ida whose ghost she is looking for). They only return the dress when interrupted by Frankie who is angry at the violation of Ida's privacy. Later, Frankie apologises and Carline notices a moment of recognition between Mel and her Aunt that foreshadows the relationship they will have (and the queer connection Carline wanted with her Aunt for herself): "A look passed between him and Frankie that almost seemed to be recognition. I thought about that. They were both of a generation which valued propriety, but I was discovering intricate private lives".[139] Stinson resists simplistic formulations of queer community by reinforcing generational tensions and (mis)connections in Frankie's home.

As Carline's visit progresses, Frankie's home as a site of grief and connection after her mother's death and a place of painful self-harming is idealised by Carline as a new space of lesbian history and a hopeful place of psychological health for her. In the most symbolic development, Carline and Frankie sort through Ida's clothing, and Carline discovers the Venus of Willendorf soap she sent to Frankie encased in a "stack of nylon slips" at the back of a drawer: "Frankie blushed when I held it up. 'It

[138] Ibid., 140-141.
[139] Ibid., 143.

has a nice fragrance,' she said, taking the soap out of my hands and tucking it in with the scarves at the back of the drawer".[140] Although Carline initially worries that her gift embarrassed or offended Frankie, in this episode Carline realises her risqué present has contributed to Frankie's secret relationship with Ida and may help Frankie keep Ida's memory vivid now she is gone. Carline's trip appears to be concluding with a "feminist" happy ending with the reassertion of women's bonding and reconciliation, if not reconnection, with a maternal figure, which is suggested in how Carline also finishes her quilted curtain. Yet this conclusion is undermined by how Carline writes letters to Lilian every day that romanticise Frankie's grief and their closeness: "I neglected the How To project to tell Lilian how the taste of fudge seemed to compliment love and grief. I described the layers of feeling I could see in Frankie's face".[141] By self-consciously pointing to how Carline is romanticising her visit, Stinson suggests Carline is constructing her own feminist happy ending and projecting an image of her "ideal home".

Stinson complicates the road trip as a journey towards women's connections and community, and Carline's reconnection with a mother figure, by revealing another affair, this time between Frankie and Mel. While Tucker is her antagonist on the road, at Frankie's it is Mel. Unable to sleep after a bout of asthma, Carline follows Tartar to the guest house where Frankie and Mel are meeting in privacy. Upon discovering the couple, Carline feels "jealousy and confusion".[142] Throughout her visit Carline has been searching for Ida's ghost, suggesting that if she feels connected with Ida she can help Frankie in mourning, both as her niece and as a fellow lesbian. Carline instead feels jealous because she realises she has not been the primary source

[140] Ibid., 147.
[141] Ibid., 148.
[142] Ibid., 151.

of her Aunt's comfort and that Mel has occupied this position through a sexual relationship, and through Frankie's sharing of Ida's clothes: "He was folding something shimmery and diaphanous".[143] Mel's cross-dressing in Ida's clothes suggests he is a replacement and projection of Ida for Frankie. Carline's pleasure of the mother-daughter resolution and reconnection is frustrated and overturned, yet again, for a romantic relationship. Stinson subverts the image of mourning and loss as a catalyst for self-destructive behaviour as Frankie returns to the site of pain (her loss of Ida) by engaging in a relationship with Mel. Frankie is Stinson's creation, but she is also a character in Carline's letters to Lilian where she has constructed the image of a tumultuous but ultimately triumphant road trip in which she discovers a new lesbian family history and rebuilds a closer intimacy with her Aunt. Frankie's relationship with Mel mirrors the abandonment she feels at the closeness of Frankie and Ida during her final summer in Chalk, and in a similar fashion, she lashes out because she feels robbed of connection and community again: "I found her greedy, my fat aunt, taking a married lover while she was supposed to be mourning. I felt tricked. Wasn't she a lesbian? Frankie's sexual life was no kind of attack on me, but I was fighting a sense of insult".[144] In this moment she redirects a hateful gaze towards her Aunt for this latest revelation, which is a result of Carline's preoccupation with labels and wanting to pin people down. Like the road, the domestic space turns out to be a site that subverts a mythology of belonging and unsettles Carline's expectations again and again.

Carline's discovery of the relationship between Frankie and Mel leads her to take off in the Mercury. She ends up at Lake Merle where she cleans Ida's car. While one reading of this act may be that Carline cleans the car to reaffirm, albeit

[143] Ibid., 151.
[144] Ibid., 151-152.

destructively, a sense of lesbian materiality like in the bathroom of the roadside restaurant, another suggests it is a form of erasure to get back at Frankie: "as I worked, I had the feeling that I was burrowing closer to Ida. I got down to details, prying up the floor mats and shaking them out above the sparse grass at the edge of the lot".[145] Afterwards Carline sits down at the muddy lakeside. As she reclines on the earth, Carline hears footsteps headed towards her but keeps her eyes closed. This time Carline does not care about the intrusion and settles into the dirt like the Venus of Willendorf accepting they are who they are and she is who she is: "I was in the Venus position without the hollow to hold ashes. I had a belly, like the original. Nothing was missing". Carline runs into the water and the inescapability of her situation: "I had thought I wanted stasis, old bonds, a place where I would be so familiar as to be unrecognisable, so had come to Chalk to be the homely niece of a maiden aunt … Instead, I found sexuality as present as breath, and nothing simple about breathing".[146] In *Venus of Chalk* water is not cleansing or purifying as it is in *She's Come Undone* and it distanced from an overt representation of transformation or rebirth like it is in *Lady Oracle*. Instead Stinson's muddy water in the lake, but also in the pond Carline and Frankie rowed across, represents on a manifest level a connection to history and place as suggested by the Venus pose and focus on soil. This grounding offers a reprieve from a wearing or hostile environment: "… now I was in the belly of the world".[147] Stinson undercuts the idea of a single ideal space like the home and instead suggests interconnected, mobile, or recurring safe spaces that may offer the opportunity for introspection and bodily connection.

[145] Ibid., 153.
[146] Ibid., 156.
[147] Ibid., 156.

In the water Carline turns away from the other person's gaze and refuses to give it power on this occasion, which is reinforced when she develops the picture of Tucker's nude photograph of her. When Carline views the photograph, she is aware that Tucker's authorship is making her see herself "through his perceptions", but as a reader and a viewer she wrests control for her own reading: "I saw disorientating beauty, much more like what I had just felt at the lake. Looking at it tapped the sense of profound possibility that was a fresh, almost physical, memory. Like looking at my lover, it made me catch my breath".[148] Although Carline finds beauty in the image, she realises her body is located amongst a series of dilapidated buildings and a "world of ugly things": "The idea hurt, but the images moved me. I wanted to trust him, not to clean things up".[149] Carline finds value in Tucker's photo even though she assumes it reflects Tucker's view of her body as ugly. In this way Stinson returns the reader to the conflicted relationship between the fat subject and the artist to suggest that there are possibilities to forge positive depictions of fat bodies even within an often painful and derisive literary and creative history. This uneasy but recuperative relation between the fat subject and the artist is reinforced when Carline finds out that Tucker initially took her photograph in case he wanted to buy the building behind her, and in Carline's words, "a fat nude by the pool would bring down the price if [he] ever made an offer".[150] Carline is hurt and angry but not surprised to discover the cruel origins of the photograph, and she accepts his apology because she has also been given a gift in the form of a photograph that makes her "look like I belong": "Tucker's pictures were less social, more of a struggle, but they had touched me deeply enough to make me feel a little bit accountable to him, too".[151] The photo is a literal representation of

[148] Ibid., 158.
[149] Ibid., 159.
[150] Ibid., 171.
[151] Ibid., 170, 172.

Carline but also a projection of what she thinks of herself. In finding beauty in this image, she reaches a type of peace and acceptance with her body. As Carline's visit comes to an end, Carline has not recovered the home she imagined but she has recovered a sense of self in relation to art and history.

Carline's increasing peace with her body does not happen in tandem with the resolution of her maternal issues, and instead Stinson parcels out the moments of oral satisfaction. Carline's visit to Frankie's ends much like the road trip, with Carline in a conflict that forces her to leave the space. The domestic section of the novel thus mirrors the road section, with conflicts of lesbian ghosting, moments of introspection in water and fat visibility, and violations of Carline's and Frankie's privacy. When she returns to Frankie's in the Mercury she tries to atone for her reckless action to Frankie, but the latter is unable to see past Carline's selfishness: "Ida gave me that car. In her will, right in front of her boys and the lawyer, she said it was for me. You just disappeared with it, as if you didn't care about anyone and everything belongs to you".[152] Carline's unplanned spying on Frankie and her taking of the Mercury mirror the violation that Carline feels when Tucker takes her picture in the pool; Carline sours a moment of intimacy and connection for Frankie as Tucker did for her. The conflict comes to its head when Frankie asks Carline to leave. The repetitive patterns in Carline's road trip reflect Ganser's observation that women's road narratives subvert the quest trajectory by troubling ideas of arrival and closure: "women's quest narratives often pose the question of arrival, of attaining the imagined goal, as a diegetic point break at which the sheer possibility of a 'better place' within the bounds of the realist narrative comes under scrutiny".[153] Stinson subverts ideas of arrival and closure by mirroring the events on the road with the events in the domestic

[152] Ibid., 161.
[153] Ganser, *Roads of Her Own* (Rodopi, 2009), 87.

realm, refusing the idea of the road or the domestic space as ideals. Instead of leaving with a rediscovered lesbian history and, in psychoanalytic terms, a repaired and stronger maternal relationship, Carline returns home in disgrace and in dire economic straits. This time, Carline travels back to Lilian by air, which offers no opportunity for romanticisation and, in a highly symbolic loss, she breaks her Venus of Willendorf in the process. At the end of her trip to Chalk Carline has been unable to find escape or freedom either on the road or in the domestic space.

Carline arrives home and unravels the events of the road trip with Lilian, including her acute and recurring bodily hatred she had previously hidden from Lilian: "Everything I said about my body had implications for her. I knew that in the deepest places knowledge can go, in my lungs, gut, heart".[154] They revisit the cemetery that Carline walks through every day to avoid harassment or attention and change it into a site of reconnection. Lilian takes Carline's gift of a bag of soil from Chalk and spreads it over her clothes and mouth in a gesture of companionship: "She meant to get through everything with me".[155] Dirt as a metaphor for grounding oneself in history and place is evoked again in this moment of reconciliation of the body. At the end of their heart-to-heart they lie at the base of the tree: "Our bodies filled that piece of ground".[156] Carline and Lilian's reclaiming of the space is also indicated in how they walk home and stumble upon another group of teenage boys. As one boy crosses their path while completing a bike trick, Carline overcomes her apprehensions through a mixture of confidence and silliness by celebrating with him by shouting and clapping: "It felt exquisite… They looked at me, laughed".[157]

[154] Stinson, *Venus of Chalk,* 179.
[155] Ibid., 180.
[156] Ibid., 180.
[157] Ibid., 181.

After reconnecting with Lilian, Carline calls Frankie and is hesitantly forgiven and allowed to attend Ida's service. Stinson depicts Carline leaving Chalk and returning via air travel in the unlikely timeframe of three days, which stretches realism but serves to illustrate how quickly both pain and forgiveness can overwhelm and set in. *Venus of Chalk* is a road narrative that includes two arrivals in Chalk. During the second visit Carline regains the sense of belonging that she lost at the beginning of the novel: "The moon was bright on the chalk as we turned into the lane".[158] On the return visit unresolved tensions are tied into bright, interconnected futures. Gifts become a symbol of reconciliation and friendship. Carline gives Mel the broken Venus of Willendorf ashtray so he can send it home as a gift for his wife Simone, who herself has sent cookies to Carline and Lilian. Mel reveals he has taken Carline's advice to get his wife to buy him some clothes, to which Carline "couldn't help but be pleased".[159] Out of these gift exchanges the most symbolic is between Tucker and Carline, who also thanks Carline for her advice to look inside the bus as opposed to outside: "You have good ideas, Carline. You bring them out in other people, too".[160] In return Carline takes one of Tucker's photographs of a drainage ditch for her "How To Ride a Bus" pamphlet, signalling a new communicative respect between the two: "Whatever the answer, I was moved to see that the revealed eloquence of cracked sidewalks, skies and ditches brought new depth and urgency to my sincere advice".[161] The fat subject and artist enter into conversation. By the end of the novel they are mutually supportive of each other's intuition and insight.

The most significant development is between Carline and Frankie, though. The manifest (social) and latent (oral-oedipal) content coalesce with Carline and

[158] Ibid., 187.
[159] Ibid., 191.
[160] Ibid., 204.
[161] Ibid., 203.

Frankie articulating their respective sources of pain and issues. While discussing the temporary nature of her relationship with Mel, Frankie finally articulates her relationship with Ida to Carline. This new and open line of communication is reciprocated when Carline reveals her history of self-harming to Frankie. Frankie gives Carline a pair of Ida's earrings, in front of Lilian who she is meeting for the first time, and they agree to pierce Carline's ears together. In the set-up of the funeral service Frankie drives the Mercury out of the garage, making a spectacle of the event by beeping the horn, turning on windshield wipers, and flashing the lights in front of an equally jubilant Library Guild: "Frankie gave a little wave, looking as sure of love as she was of grief; then she missed the open gate and drove the Mercury into the back corner of the shed".[162] Stinson frames a moment of intense emotion with another minor comedic accident to juxtapose vulnerability in joy with vulnerability in pain. Frankie has to lie down to recover, but the Library Guild takes over the kitchen preparation duties for the wake. The kitchen becomes the site of the women's community Carline has been looking for in Chalk, one that includes lesbian visibility: "The excitement in the kitchen – the smell of onions and cold baked hams, the vision of Lilian, swathed in one of Frankie's aprons, breaking open heads of lettuce with her bare hands – gave me strength".[163] The Guild in this episode mirrors the feminist reading group that is featured in the prologue and epilogue who are also described as one body of bustling energy: "Sarah asks for another poem from Lil, but Jen yells for more food. Lilian fans her crinoline and ripples it in the air, blushing and laughing. The smell of cherry pie fills the room".[164] *Venus of Chalk* ends with a network of women's communities, in the Guild, in the feminist salon, and even in Carline's workplace, that are, like the pools Carline swims in, wells of connection to draw on.

[162] Ibid., 192.
[163] Ibid., 193.
[164] Ibid., 207.

At the conclusion of the novel, Stinson depicts women's communities as fluid, dynamic, and reoccurring "spaces" intertwined with the idea of hearth and home.

The close of the novel depicts Frankie commemorating her love for Ida in front of her community and moving on from Chalk. In contrast to *Lady Oracle* and *She's Come Undone* where mothers die, often unhappily and dissatisfied, Stinson depicts a maternal figure receiving a happier ending with her sense of self reassured and an equal part of a positive conclusion. Frankie is able to commemorate Ida at the service, articulating the loss she and others feel now she is gone: "My aunt went on like that, her skin so red as to become transparent, listing skills and pleasures in her lover's life. Frankie was burning with feeling".[165] In this service Frankie's love for Ida is "visible" for the first time on a public platform of Chalk's residents. Frankie states: "I love her, she is with me every day. Speaking of her to you means so much", to which Carline reflects: "They were simple declarations, but I saw release in my aunt's eyes as she stood before friends and neighbors gathered in her shed and said, 'that's enough'".[166] Soon afterwards Carline discovers Frankie has decided to sell the farm to Tucker who plans to set up his own bus company. In leaving the farm Frankie can make her loudest declaration to Ida yet, working with the Guild to conserve the land and create the "Ida Community Land Trust".[167] *Venus of Chalk* ends as it began: with a departure. Frankie reveals that she plans to leave the farm to go travelling in the Mercury. After Ida's funeral service when Frankie and Lilian are piercing Carline's ears, Frankie reveals she hopes to travel ocean to ocean, seeing canyons and cities, and, in a reverse of Carline's journey, "travelling north as far as it goes".[168] Although Carline reflects that the draw of the road will not provide all the answers

[165] Ibid., 195.
[166] Ibid., 196.
[167] Ibid., 200.
[168] Ibid., 205.

she hopes for –"I wanted to warn her about the kind of dreams that rest on too much motion" – Carline's journey brought them to this spot, with Frankie and Lilian pressed against Carline's side as they pierce her ears.[169] The ear piercing is a recuperative, regenerative symbol of the pain that comes with growth versus the pain that comes with hate: "To be pierced so carefully was worlds away from cutting in despair".[170] The concluding image of Carline hugging both "Lil and Frankie by their hips" suggests a positive future for their relationships with each other and their relationships with their bodies.[171] It also represents the acceptance and coming together of the maternal-daughter storyline, with the mother part of her reparative relationship with her body. Stinson's burial of the psychological storyline enables her to enact a satisfying mother-daughter conclusion.

In conclusion, *Venus of Chalk* represents an important development in literary representations of fatness by depicting a psychological and physical journey towards community and belonging that does not hinge on weight loss or bodily change. In contrast to earlier portrayals of fatness, notably in *Lady Oracle* and *She's Come Undone*, Carline's narrative tells a story of self-improvement that involves coming to terms with accepting a lack of total control over her body and focuses on the present conditions of fat-phobia that keep old insecurities alive. I have shown how both the road and the domestic space are far from spaces of escape and liberation for Carline, and are instead ambiguous places of psychological escape that are wrought with their own tensions and struggles over gender, sexuality and privacy. I have argued that Stinson embraces alternative and abstract spaces of escape and liberation that materialise in women's communities and moments of bodily connection, in the form

[169] Ibid., 205.
[170] Ibid., 206.
[171] Ibid., 206.

of joyous physical movement. I also extend abstract spaces of liberation to cultural visibility of fatness and queerness in terms of the artist's canvas, such as Tucker's photographs and Lilian's poetry. Stinson deviates from other women's road narratives since Carline does not seek to domesticate or reclaim the "masculinized" road or radicalise or untangle the domestic space from its history of women's constraint and queer denial. By depicting alternative abstract spaces Stinson's road narrative reclaims a more durable and lasting relationship to the idea of a space of escape and liberation through nature, community and history. I have also considered Carline's less overt mother-daughter conflict through Norman Holland's theory of story as fantasy, suggesting that the novel's buried psychoanalytic story enriches her size acceptance and queer themes. In this road narrative, Stinson explores an equally potent and satisfying "domestic" narrative of family and acceptance. Stinson's road narrative radically reformulates what freedom looks like, in both social and psychoanalytic terms, from the perspective of a lesbian, fat character.

The epilogue of *Venus of Chalk* reinforces the need for more stories like Carline's. When Carline has finished retelling her road trip story to her friends, the concluding image is one of hunger: "Hungry again, they are calling my name".[172] The novel ends with an audience ravenous for narratives like Carline's painful, messy but ultimately positive bodily journey. Yet as Elana Dykewomon notes, size-positive adventurers remain in the minority: "When Susan Stinson started writing novels, I was delighted, I thought, here it is: the world is cracked open. Fat women, fat lesbians, have new agency and power… But then it kind of stopped".[173] Dykewomon outlines how fictions with fat characters continued to be written but the stereotypes Stinson refuses and parodies in *Venus of Chalk*, such as consumption as self-harm and

[172] Ibid., 207.
[173] Dykewomon, "In Search of the Fabled Fat Woman", 2.

perpetual adolescence, are augmented and repackaged in the 2010s. In the following chapter, I analyse a representative text from the 2010s, Lionel Shriver's *Big Brother* (2013), and its relation to a culture of consumption through Rob Nixon's theory of slow violence and consider how the journeys of fat characters in 2010s fictions focus on the act of caring and grieving for family members. In the most recent fictions, fat characters move from the road to the couch, from the kitchen to the supermarket, and from storyteller to silent subject.

Chapter Five

The Threat Within: The Refused Weight Loss Journey in Lionel Shriver's *Big Brother*

Lionel Shriver's *Big Brother* (2013) recalls protagonist Pandora's struggles with her brother Edison during his final visit to her home after he has gained 200 pounds. The novel depicts her struggle with grief and feelings of responsibility after his death for not helping him more proactively when she had the opportunity: "[N]othing in this life is free. Having dodged paying the piper while Edison was still alive, I pay now instead. I pay every day".[1] This chapter examines the representation of Edison's body and his unfulfilled and refused transformational journey of weight loss in *Big Brother*, analysing how Shriver contributes to a recent medical turn in twenty-first-century fiction through her use of narrative authority and counterfactual narrative. Drawing on Rob Nixon's theory of "slow" ecological violence, this chapter argues that Shriver depicts Edison's characterisation as a toxic contaminant of Pandora's home and a threat to the family unit to explore fears about fat in the 2010s.[2] Edison's characterisation as a threat is reinforced in a sequence of the novel where Pandora imagines what might have happened had she sacrificed the time and energy to help Edison recover and lose weight. Pandora imagines Edison succumbing to his destructive appetite regardless of the lengths to which she goes to help him, which she later recognises is an attempt to assuage her guilt for her inaction before her brother's

[1] Lionel Shriver, *Big Brother* (London: Harper Collins, 2013), 373.
[2] Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2011).

death. Drawing on literary criticism on scientific thought in twenty-first-century fiction, Shriver's novel critiques the fatalistic thought that has emerged in the obesity epidemic era around the (im)possibility of the super-obese person's recovery.[3] Shriver shines a light on the hyperbolic panic around fat following the declaration of an obesity epidemic and critiques the interpretation of fat bodies as inevitably doomed to decay and death.

The fat character as an object of study is a symptom of a much larger shift towards the medical in fiction. To explain this trend, I focus on a contemporary novel that self-consciously explores and complicates the fat character as an embodied other. *Big Brother* is a semi-autobiographical narrative that represents the experience of fatness through a family member of an obese character.[4] *Big Brother* tells the life story of posthumous super-obese character, Edison Appaloosa, from the perspective of his younger sister Pandora. *Big Brother* is focused on a wealthy Midwestern family, and would not be out of place next to the popular "domestic realism" of Jonathan Franzen in focusing on the local and the family.[5] The quiet lifestyle of narrator Pandora Halfdanarson is precisely why the sudden and excessive weight gain of her brother Edison – 200 pounds in three years – garners the pseudo-apocalyptic language it does in a novel that is otherwise about a quiet marriage working through the seven-year itch. The arrival of Edison brings to the fore tensions in her relationship with her brother and her husband and raises questions about loyalty

[3] Samantha Murray, *The 'Fat' Female Body* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

[4] *Big Brother* is linked to Shriver's own experiences with her brother who died in 2009 following a cardiac arrest. In an article published an hour before her brother died Shriver stated that, "I used to look up to him in every sense. I ended our last two visits in tears. My brother breaks my heart. He's obscenely smart ... but he's also, sadly, a good test case for the claim that one can be 'healthy at every size'". See, Lionel Shriver, "I Can't Accept 'Fat Pride'" *Standpoint* (2009) http://standpointmag.co.uk/node/2426/full (accessed 5 May 2016). Reviews of the book ranging from Juiny Willet's "Too Large to Fail: Lionel Shriver's Big Brother" *New York Times* (June 2013) and Viv Groskop "Lionel Shriver: Time to talk about her Big Brother" *The Observer* (21 April, 2013) frame the book as both a response to her brother's passing and according to Viv Gropskop, "for Shriver, 55, this book surely represents some kind of wish-fulfilment in novel form".

[5] Jonathan Franzen, *The Corrections* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001).

between new and old families. In the intense and highly wrought relationship between Pandora and her brother, Shriver explores her attempt to face her complex feelings of guilt, resentment and pain in a time of mourning. Pandora has to confront her own inaction when faced with her brother's weight-gain, which to her signifies a cry for help. The urgency to understand the destructive and self-destructive behaviour of Edison becomes tied up with a desire to understand her own compulsion to eat, as well as the events and forces that unleashed this appetite. Pandora needs to comprehend and explain the destructive and self-destructive behaviour of Edison to process the guilt she feels.

Big Brother presents a view of fatness that resonates with a pathologised understanding of fatness as a disease, if not contagion. I identify this novel, but also Jami Attenberg's *The Middlesteins* (2011), Michael Kimball's *Big Ray* (2012) and Liz Moore's *Heft* (2013), as contemporary obesity narratives as opposed to contemporary fatness narratives, to self-consciously draw attention to this positionality.[6] To discuss fatness within an obesity framework is to collapse corpulent bodily size within a narrative of healthist decline, as both a cause of illness, such as diabetes and heart disease, and a disease in and of itself. Since the late 2000s fat has been increasingly depicted as diseased and parasitic, but also contagious. New studies have emerged that go so far as to claim fat can be passed on through shared bonds and even shared spaces.[7] Contemporary obesity narratives engage with the medico-pharmaceutical complex by exploring the pervasive and increasingly extreme pathologisation of fatness in their fictions. *Big Brother* illustrates this most expertly, characterising

[6] Jami Attenberg, *The Middlesteins* (London: Serpent's Tail, 2011); Michael Kimball, *Big Ray* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2012); Liz Moore, *Heft* (New York: Windmill Random House, 2013).
[7] Nicholas A. Christakis, "The Spread of Obesity in a Large Social Network over 32 Years" *New England Journal of Medicine*, 357.4 (2007), 370-379; Trevor D. Lawley et al, "Culturing of 'unculturable' human microbiota reveals novel taxa and extensive sporulation" *Nature* 533 (2016). 543-546.

Edison as an infectious, threatening presence in Pandora's home. Shriver explores how panic around fat feeds into fears about health in increasingly hyperbolic ways.

Contemporary obesity narratives are a subsection of a recent trend toward the medical in fiction. The medical turn refers to a cluster of fictions in the twenty-first century that to date has focused on neurological and behavioural characters and conditions; it refers to increasing scientific discourse in fiction and writers' engagement with science. Criticism has interpreted the engagement with science as either revealing a crisis about the meaning of literature and "the alleged capacity of science to explain [the novelist] better than he can explain himself", as Marco Roth argues, or as a refreshing reservoir for new fictional devices and narrative tools "to refresh and redeem the field of literature", as Gary Johnson remarks.[8] While these novels are by no means the only texts to explore illness or science in fiction, the novels that recur in criticism of the medical turn in contemporary fiction include Ian McEwan's *Enduring Love* (1997) featuring de Clérambault's syndrome and continues with, among others, novels with characters with Tourette's syndrome in Jonathan Lethem's *Motherless Brooklyn* (1999), autism in Mark Haddon's *Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (2003), facial agnosia and Capgras syndrome in Richard Powers's *The Echomaker* (2006), and paranoid schizophrenia John Wray's *Lowboy* (2009).[9] These novels tend to focus around a character with a condition which has a marked effect on plot and aesthetic. Roth and Johnson have established that there are three characteristics of contemporary illness narratives popularised by neurological novels: narratives textured with scientific explanations and theorisations; a gulf

[8] Marco Roth, "The Rise of the Neuronovel" *N+1* 8 (2009); Gary Johnson, "Consciousness as Content: Neuronarratives and the Redemption of Fiction" *Mosaic* 41.1 (2008), 172.
[9] Ian McEwan, *Enduring Love* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1997); Jonathan Lethem's *Motherless Brooklyn* (New York: Doubleday, 1999); Mark Haddon's *Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (New York: Doubleday, 2003); Richard Powers's *The Echomaker* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006); John Wray's *Lowboy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009).

between understanding oneself and others; and a tension between biological determinism and free will. [10] While existing criticism has debated to what extent this trend "cedes ground to science", it is more accurate to say that, in Charles Fernyhough's words: "by putting neuroscience into fiction we can find out what kinds of explanations will ultimately be satisfying to us".[11] The medical turn is broader than neurological conditions and includes new attempts to explore the physicality of the body, such as obesity, for which this summary is equally pertinent. I engage with Fernyhough's suggestion and examine how Shriver explores the infiltration of scientific discourse about fatness into public consciousness. Furthermore, I ask to what extent this consumption of science also curtails the kind of possibilities and imaginaries available for fat characters.

Big Brother holds academic significance for scholars of fat studies because of the way Shriver both relies on but ultimately refuses the authority of scientific discourse to understand fat bodies. Shriver uses medical language and cultural truisms about fatness to investigate the cultural and personal reasons for Edison's sudden weight gain. In contrast to fat studies critic Samantha Murray's assertion that Western culture has a "collective knowingness" about fat, I argue that what is revealed in this new literary trend, exemplified in *Big Brother*, is a challenge to or exploration of the failures of this body "literacy".[12] Murray argues in *The 'Fat' Female Body* (2008) that as subjects of Western society one is taught that the history, lifestyle, flaws and personality of the fat person, and specifically the fat woman, can be read from the body and, as such, are *known*: "We see a 'fat' woman, and we *know* her as lazy,

[10] Roth, "The Rise of the Neuronovel" *N+1* 8 (2009); Johnson, "Consciousness as Content: Neuronarratives and the Redemption of Fiction" *Mosaic* 41.1 (2008).
[11] Charles Fernyhough, *The Voices Within: The History and Science of How We Talk to Ourselves* (London: Profile Books, 2016), 23.
[12] Murray, *The 'Fat' Female Body* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 32.

greedy, of inferior intelligence … somewhere within us these kinds of understandings, these *knowledges*, of what her 'fatness' means to us are stirred and brought to the surface in unconscious ways".[13] This focus on "reading" the bodies of others is a reversal of Helene Cixous's concept of "reading" one's own body, senses and embodiment for self-articulation: "Write yourself; your body must be heard. Then will bring forth the immense resources of your unconscious".[14] Instead Murray stresses how fat bodies are too often read by others for their inner life, fears, inhibitions, desires and pleasures. *Big Brother* most certainly reflects the cultural truisms Murray describes; however, the attempt to explain, investigate, justify, or otherwise arm oneself with "knowledge" about obesity in these novels ends up falling short. The desire for knowledge and objective fact that science can supposedly promise most plainly unveils a deep anxiety around *not* being able to read or make sense of obesity as a disease – or rather, a preventable disease. In the conclusion, I evaluate the tension in *Big Brother* as a novel that muddies these assumptions yet also heavily invests in the idea of fat as bad and deadly, and the fat body as disgusting and humiliating.

A crucial way Shriver explores the fear around fat in contemporary US culture is by appropriating disaster imagery to represent social issues such as obesity. It is fruitful to consider how Shriver's representation of Edison's sudden and drastic weight gain resonates with the imagery of the ecological trauma concept known as "slow violence". Rob Nixon proposes this term to "give symbolic shape and plot to formless [ecological] threats whose fatal repercussions are dispersed across space and

[13] Ibid., 32.
[14] Helene Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa" in Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (eds) *Literary Theory: An Anthology* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2017), 943.

time".[15] This includes slow-acting violence, like climate change, toxic drift, and desertification: forms of ecological disaster that predominantly impact the environment of the world's poor (whom Michael Rothberg identifies as "the same people most directly and harshly affected by the neo-liberal regime of accumulation").[16] The study of "slow violence" attempts to comprehend "a violence that is neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive".[17] It is the "violence of delayed destruction" that is "typically not viewed as violence at all".[18] Shriver evokes ecological disaster to explore America's accumulation disaster, to borrow Rothberg's term, represented through obesity.

The language and imagery of ecological disaster is appropriated in *Big Brother* in two ways: Edison's overeating is presented as a form of slow violence directed towards his own body, and a violence that Pandora and Fletcher experience as happening within their home and family. By analysing Edison's disruption of the physical home, Shriver explores "fat panic" through metaphors of contamination and threat and explores issues of silence and the unspeakability of obesity in the post-obesity epidemic US.

Big Brother begins with a dissection of the important yet problematic centrality of food in US culture. In *Lady Oracle* and *She's Come Undone* food is an individual problem for the compulsive eaters Joan and Dolores, but in *Big Brother* Pandora theorises her brother's compulsive eating as an example of a wider societal problem in the US. In *Big Brother*, food has the potential to carry a wide range of

[15] Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Harvard University Press, 2011), 14.
[16] Michael Rothberg, "Preface" in Gert Buelens, Samuel Durrant and Robert Eaglestone (eds) *The Future of Trauma Theory: Contemporary Literary and Cultural Criticism* (London: Routledge), xv.
[17] Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Harvard University Press, 2011), 2.
[18] Ibid., 2.

projected meanings and the nature of food as an idea or promise becomes a point of tension:

> [F]ood is by nature elusive. More concept than substance, food is the *idea* of satisfaction itself, which is why diet can exert the sway of religion or political zealotry. Not irresistible tastiness but the very failure of food to reward is what drives us to eat more of it … The actual eating part almost doesn't happen. This near-total inability to deliver is what makes the pleasures of the table so tantalizing, and also so dangerous.[19]

Pandora is fascinated with the double nature of food as both a physical and immaterial construct and at the start of the novel interprets a collective national disconnection from food. She adopts a pseudo-evolutionary discourse to account for the obesity epidemic in the US: "Having conspicuously triumphed in the competition for resources, the fleshiest among us are therefore towering biological success stories. But ask any herd of overpopulating deer: nature punishes success".[20] She becomes fixated on the growing personal and national significance of food in the modern day: "You couldn't help but wonder what earthly good was a microprocessor, a space telescope, or a particle accelerator, when we had mislaid the most animal of masteries. Why bother to discover the Higgs boson or solve the economics of hydrogen-powered cars? We no longer knew how to eat".[21] Pandora begins to see food losing its necessary materiality for both Edison and wider culture as a thing of substance. Food becomes a de-familiarised idea with extraordinary potential.

Before Edison arrives at Solomon Drive, food is already a point of conflict and contention in the Feuerbach-Halfdanarson household. Although Pandora and Fletcher's relationship is initially forged around the idea of hard work, Pandora's

[19] Shriver, *Big Brother*, 4-5.
[20] Ibid., 5.
[21] Ibid., 270-271.

relationship with her husband Fletcher is strained by his recent healthist regime that leaves her feeling isolated and body shamed after gaining twenty pounds during the course of their marriage. Fletcher begins to cycle regularly and launches a "nutritional Nazi" health regime, "glower[ing] nearby" whenever his children Cody and Tanner go near Pandora's homemade treats.[22] Pandora feels personally slighted by Fletcher's health-obsessed behaviour because it feels like a way to shut her out. Later in the novel Pandora admits she is left with a feeling of "unalloyed disgust" when faced with Fletcher's "fanatical cycling" and feels perplexed over "why the rigidity of my husband's diet should be driving us apart when after all it was only food".[23] Food is tied up with personal criticism and enhances Pandora's existing feelings of being out of place in her stepfamily.

Big Brother is a story of Pandora's relationship with her family just as much as it is a story about Edison's visit. She meticulously keeps her home clean, and she is keenly aware that there are three Feuerbachs in the home and only one Halfdanarson. Pandora considers herself a foil in her own life. Even though Pandora is a successful entrepreneur and makes the family's primary income, she bought a home that is well suited to display her husband's craft furniture. She manages to create a lucrative business out of custom-made satirical dolls that make fun of loved ones with stock-phrases. Pandora is left financially secure to the point where she is left aimless: "Wise high-flyers kept this battle with the baffling flatness of success discreetly to themselves … Thwarted hopes are no picnic, but desire itself is energizing".[24] At the

[22] Ibid., 14.
[23] Ibid., 105.
[24] Ibid., 27.

time her brother arrives at her home, Pandora is looking for a "new project".[25] The tension between her homelife and her worklife infuses her brother's visit.

Unaware of Edison's weight gain, Pandora arrives at the airport expecting the jazz musician brother whom she idealises and views as her more exciting "alter ego": "My brother had been imbued with all the verve, the flair, the savoir faire that I lacked".[26] Edison's glamorous characteristics are offset with his preoccupation with fame that Pandora shuns: "I could see coveting recognition for his talent, but that wasn't what made him tick. Ever since I could remember, he'd wanted to be famous".[27] At the airport, Pandora unknowingly overhears a critical conversation about Edison between two of his fellow travellers: "They should really charge double, and leave the next seat empty … By the way, on the plane with that guy, what I really couldn't stand? Was the *smell*".[28] Through the derogatory conversation of strangers, Shriver introduces Edison's body through his secretions before he appears in the novel. When Pandora is reintroduced to Edison she struggles to identify her brother in this different form and refers to him as "it": "I peered into the round face, its features stretched as if painted on a balloon".[29] The family greet Edison in shock except stepdaughter Cody: "I wondered how many times recently anyone had held him like that – with joy, with affection, with no trace of distaste. I wish I'd hugged him that way myself".[30]

When Edison arrives Pandora attempts to unite his new bodily change with his former existence, which produces an objectifying gaze. At the heart of Pandora's recollection of Edison's visit is an attempt to come to terms with her brother's bodily

[25] Ibid., 27.
[26] Ibid., 27, 29.
[27] Ibid., 29-30.
[28] Ibid., 32-34.
[29] Ibid., 35.
[30] Ibid., 53.

change but it is always from an external perspective and therefore implicates notions of narrative authority. Shriver's depiction recalls Hannah Rosefield's analysis of *Big Ray*, *Butter*, *Heft* and *The Middlesteins*, and what she identifies as a new "literature of physicality".[31] Rosefield claims that the contemporary novel of obesity is making strides in representing the "physicality as well as the psychology and sociology of obesity".[32] She goes on to make a compelling case that the literary imaginary of the twenty-first century places emphasis on physicality in the modern novel, including "what it's like to move as an obese person", with prose "crammed with high blood pressure, high cholesterol, diabetes, bone spurs … and flesh 'pocked, veined, bloated'".[33] However, while Rosefield makes a compelling case, she underplays the brutality of these images around the body, and in turn reveals how they better reflect the often ambivalent feelings of the narrator towards the fat character. For instance, on the first night of Edison's stay, Tanner describes his difficulty standing up on his own two feet ("that whale gut throws him forward, and he ends up on his hands and knees!").[34] In this description Edison is a parody of a walking infant. The new "physicality" of fat in twenty-first-century novels is implicated in the narrative power of the protagonist and a sensationalising gaze. Pandora, too, objectifies her brother's body in humiliating terms: "I stole glances when he was occupied with his food, terrified he'd catch me staring – at the rolls of his neck, the gapes between straining buttons on his shirt, the tight, bulging fingers that recalled bratwurst in the skillet just before the skin splits".[35] The language Shriver evokes to describe fat characters often becomes brutal, voyeuristic and narratologically alienating, with the character

[31] Hannah Rosenfield, "Obesity as Metaphor" *LA Review of Books* (27 December 2012) https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/obesity-as-metaphor/ (accessed 15 July 2015)
[32] Ibid.
[33] Ibid.
[34] Shriver, *Big Brother*, 45-46.
[35] Ibid., 45-46.

distanced from the reader and the reader's proxy, the narrator. This sense of alienation defines Pandora's description of Edison's journey.

Pandora's difficulty in understanding her brother's sudden weight gain is compounded by the silence that pervades his arrival. She feels unable to broach the topic of his fatness and quickly learns what she identifies as the cultural unspeakability around obesity. The emphasis on his body is reinforced by the vacuous emptiness of his speech that rarely, if ever, articulates emotion. Edison's dialogue is defined by hollow and repetitive stories of his past jazz career, littered with obscure jazz references and show business jargon. Several years after his career peaked, the anecdotes he tells have now grown old and worn. If Pandora's marriage with her husband Fletcher is defined by a "mutual silence that [is] captivating," Edison's "ceaseless chat" is decidedly tiresome.[36] The cultural "etiquette" around fatness and Edison's own unwillingness to engage in anything but empty conversation results in Pandora "reading" his body for answers to his bodily change, to return to Murray's concept of cultural literacy about the fat body. Shriver suggests that "reading" the body for his motivations and stresses is necessary due to an indirectness about fat in US culture that renders fat unspeakable. In *Big Brother* reading Edison's body is all Pandora can work from to understand a change that is otherwise inexplicable to herself and her family.

Edison's weight gain represents evidence of a real problem to Pandora but also an indulgence. Shriver introduces imagery of bombing and war zones to describe Edison's presence on the first night he arrives: "We seemed to be experiencing a domestic post-traumatic stress, as if recovering from an improvised explosive device

[36] Ibid., 6.

planted at our dining table".[37] The sense that the family has taken responsibility for a bigger issue than they realised is confirmed the next morning when Pandora awakes to Edison's breakfast feast complete with honey soaked pancakes. When Pandora spontaneously tells him to stop eating pancakes, the first admission of the self-evident problem, the room falls silent. Although Pandora feels terrible for scolding Edison, and therefore drawing attention to his physical change, she also interprets his weight in terms of his long-standing penchant for dramatics. Pandora theorises that the thing that went "terribly wrong" with Edison, is connected to an all or nothing lifestyle where "plot had always to be writ large".[38] His fatness, according to Pandora, is orientated in his personality that tends towards the dramatic and selfish: "If my brother's weight was symptomatic of something wrong, then it also emblemized a vanity. He wasn't the type to submit to slings and arrows with a bit of a paunch. In the same style in which he'd schemed to succeed, so also would he fail: on a grand scale".[39] Underneath Pandora's pseudo-psychoanalysis is the idea that Edison's obesity, and cry for help, is somehow underscored by choice and self-obsession. Pandora "reads" Edison's body as both a plea for help and a self-indulgent display that is one part of a wider catalogue of his character flaws.

Edison's diet of junk food and junk television is a constantly exposed wound in Pandora's home, and it colours the family's everyday life. Fletcher privately rages that Edison's presence creates a "miasma in the house. Of sloth. Of laziness. Of malaise".[40] Nixon's concept of slow violence is germane to Shriver's depiction of obesity in *Big Brothe*r. Shriver explores, to tweak Nixon's assertion, the accumulation disaster on the environment of the world's privileged. Shriver appropriates the

[37] Ibid., 58.
[38] Ibid., 78.
[39] Ibid., 78.
[40] Ibid., 112.

symbolism and language of ecological disaster to explore the scourge of "too plenty". Nixon claims that events like hurricane Katrina and the Asian tsunami dramatically expose the inequalities and deprivations of everyday modern life. In *Big Brother* the "event" of the Edison's obesity entering the upper-middle class home of Pandora dramatically exposes the various privileges of modern day life in the US represented in Edison's overeating, but also in the material wealth of Pandora. The novel keeps the relationship between food and income inequality largely marginal to the main story, representing it primarily through an eerie fear of inequalities entering in the home.

It dawns on Pandora that if Edison – a healthy, charismatic, talented jazz musician – could find himself destroyed by lethargy and overeating, it is not beyond anyone: "I liked to imagine that I was incapable of doing nothing for whole afternoons myself, but maybe what disturbed me was that I was capable of it. I feared this was a knack one could get the hang of rather readily, and it was therefore now lurking in my house, waiting for me to pick it up like a winter flu".[41] In paralleling obesity – a bodily state that has been typically understood as a result of behavioural patterns, such as overeating and a lack of physical activity – with a virus emerging from airborne germs, Shriver attempts to tackle the "rhetorical and visual challenges posed by slow violence", like the "obesity epidemic", by reconstituting its invisibility in different terms. This juxtaposition of epidemic imagery is something that Nixon notes in fictions of disaster and environmentalism: "in aligning themselves with pre-existing movements, [writers] have given imaginative definition to the issues at stake while enhancing the public visibility of the cause".[42] By re-defining the invisibility of

[41] Ibid., 80.
[42] Nixon, 6.

obesity in terms of virality, Shriver participates in what Nixon articulates as a writerly agenda to "turn the long emergences of slow violence into stories dramatic enough to rouse public sentiment and warrant political intervention".[43] In the conflict between these two siblings, Shriver depicts Edison bringing the obesogenic environment of the US society directly into Pandora's home, and explores how fear of fat has become more insidious in contemporary America. Shriver describes how the house hums with a low-level buzz of televisual mediums that Edison uses all day: "Fletcher said that down in the basement he could hear the yammer of the TV … for hours on end".[44] In *She's Come Undone* television is a form of self-medication for Dolores, but in *Big Brother* television is infused with the power to corrupt and even infect others.

Edison's threatening presence is most clear in his repeated conflicts with Fletcher, his health-obsessed double, about food. Whereas in *Venus of Chalk* Frankie's kitchen is a site of women's communities and connections, in *Big Brother* the kitchen is where Edison and Fletcher battle for the role of head of the household.[45] One day Pandora walks in to find the two engaged in a Western-style stand-off because of Edison's calorific supermarket food: "I found him faced off with Fletcher in the kitchen, surrounded by groceries on every counter … If this was a duel, my husband was the sheriff, my brother the outlaw".[46] Whereas earlier novels were defined by power struggles between mothers and daughters, and daughters eating to resist becoming made over in her mother's image, the antagonistic relationship between Fletcher and Edison is driven by masculine ego and competition. In *Lady Oracle* Joan's transformation through weight loss is partially due to the toxic diet products of her mother and the infection she gets from an arrow she believes is a sign

[43] Ibid., 3.
[44] Shriver, 79.
[45] Susan Stinson, *Venus of Chalk* (Ann Arbor, MI: Firebrand Books, 2004).
[46] Shriver, *Big Brother,* 80.

from her Aunt Lou. In *Big Brother* Fletcher considers the processed foodstuffs Edison brings into the home to be "poison" and "toxic".[47] In Shriver's novel, like Atwood's, the relationship between care and toxicity is muddied, and there is a power struggle between two real or pseudo-parental figures.

The Western genre invoked in the previous quotation is a tongue-in-cheek dramatisation of their situation (as Pandora says, it is "only food") but it also calls into question good and bad (or rather, bad and worse) relationships with food. While Shriver evokes a dualism between Fletcher and Edison to break down the notion that fat people are the only people manifesting obsessive relationships with food in contemporary America, she also makes it clear that the stakes are high around consumption. In this novel, Fletcher's obsessive behavior around food is more sympathetic and justifiable than Edison's. Pandora explains to Edison that food had previously destroyed Fletcher's family when his first wife, Cleo, developed a crystal meth addiction for the purposes of losing weight: ". . . soon she was leaving the kids unattended, disappearing for days. Lost several teeth… The whole spiral – it was pretty traumatic. Left Fletcher with a control thing".[48] Food is linked directly with the downward spiral of addiction and the downfall of otherwise model citizens. Children are presented as the direct victims of this spiral. The kitchen and eating is shifted from comfort and nurturing to a space that needs to be monitored continuously for evidence of "poison" that will otherwise contaminate others, specifically children and families.

The anxiety of contamination in the affluent middle-class home of Pandora and Fletcher is reminiscent of what Catherine Jurca calls the "fantasy of

[47] Ibid.,14, 80.
[48] Shriver, *Big Brother,* 82.

victimization" fostered in the twentieth-century suburban novel.[49] What is in many ways the epitome of material advantage, the freedom to buy and choose one's food, turns into an "artifact of spiritual and cultural oppression".[50] However, the anxieties Shriver explores in the characterisation of Pandora and Fletcher in *Big Brother* are more than a "fantasy of victimization" and speak to "historically potent manifestations of real social crisis".[51] *Big Brother* explores the fear of fat at a time when fat bodies are associated with disease and death. To depict this fear of fat as death and destruction, Shriver approaches the fat body as a "spectacular" disastrous event in Pandora's home. The "spectacularisation" of Edison's stay is not to establish his social alienation, which is clear at times in the other novels examined in this thesis, but instead to align "obesity" and the "obesity epidemic", usually a form of "slow violence" that is "slow moving and long in the making", with the "instant spectacle" and calamity of disaster that Nixon claims is venerated in the media.[52] In doing so, Shriver aims to depict this fear of fat specifically in terms of a violent and insidious disaster.

Edison's obesity is a punishing form of self-destruction that demands an audience. When Pandora is finally able to broach the subject of Edison's size, she attributes his weight to his not wanting to try: "'There's the one little problem of my not giving a shit.' That was, of course, not one problem, but the problem".[53] To Pandora, Edison's overeating intersects with addiction, illness and suicide and presents a form of individual delayed destruction that they are forced to watch:

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[49] Catherine Jurca, *White Diaspora: The Suburb and the Twentieth-Century American Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 8-9.
[50] Ibid., 9.
[51] Susan Edmunds, "Accelerated Immobilities: American Suburbia and the Classless Middle Class" *American Literary History* 15 (2003), 415-416.
[52] Nixon, 3, 6.
[53] *Big Brother*, 85.

"Whenever he ate rich or sweet things around me I got agitated, no less so than if he'd carved himself with a razor blade in plain view".[54] Fat is not a private issue in this novel but a burden, even punishment for loved ones witnessing an act of flagrant self-destruction. In *Lady Oracle* and *She's Come Undone* eating is intertwined with passive aggressive reactionary displays to negotiate an overbearing maternal relationship. In these novels eating is a way for Joan and Dolores to assert their autonomy against their mothers, who represent a suffocating matrilineal destiny. In contrast in *Big Brother* Edison's consumption is depicted as an almost obscene act in the home of Pandora, which is clear in the extreme rhetoric and jarring metaphor of the razor blade. The obscenity is heightened by how family are, according to Pandora, powerless to do anything but act as spectators to this act of self-harm. This powerlessness equates to a form of complicity for Pandora, who lets Edison take over cooking duties for the family: "It was our kitchen, and he was only able to install the ingredients thanks to the cash I slipped him and the loan of Fletcher's pickup. In providing the venue and materials, I was complicit".[55] Moreover, Pandora cleans the mess up each night, returning to disaster imagery of battlegrounds and war zones: "My brother's generosity extended to making the kitchen look like Chechnya, but not to cleaning it up".[56] In *Lady Oracle* and *She's Come Undone* mother figures have power to interject with their daughters about their behaviour; in Pandora's home she feels at the mercy of Edison's displays.

Edison's presence disrupts various relationship dynamics in Pandora's home. After cleaning up each night with Edison, the siblings reminisce about their television star father's family sitcom. Edison creates a wedge between Pandora and Fletcher,

[54] Ibid., 93-94.
[55] Ibid., 98.
[56] Ibid., 98.

who complains, "All the in-jokes about *Joint Custody*. The chummy digs at your dad and Joy Whatserface. The ritual haggle about what really happened to your mother… Jesus, I should move out and you two can get married".[57] As Edison and Pandora continue reminiscing about their childhood, Fletcher grows quieter and begins eating separate meals.[58] However, the quiet battle between Edison and Fletcher settles most overtly on Edison's influence over Fletcher's son Tanner and his dreams of a job in film. Fletcher and Edison see in Tanner a potential apprentice and they both try to recruit him to their industries (carpentry for Fletcher, show business for Edison). At odds are two ways of living and prospering, and two artistic philosophies. Fletcher, a twenty-first-century heroic artisan, to borrow a term from masculinity critic Michael Kimmel, is a craftsman who makes tangible, quality goods with his hands.[59] Fletcher, much like his nineteenth-century forbears, invests in the philosophy of producerism which views virtue as earned through hard work and creating more than you consume. Fletcher values quality, evident in his depreciation of Pandora's satirical dolls as silly entertainment, but also prioritises practicality in his artwork:

> I still make things people can sit on. They just happen to look good. Tanner could do a lot worse than apprentice himself in our basement. Instead he thinks he can float out of this house into la-la land, where in truth he'll be pimped out to perverts on some street corner. Your *brother* is shoring up the boy's illusions.[60]

Fletcher's artistic philosophy reflects the wider discourse of usefulness, purpose and humility that he and Pandora struggle to instill in Tanner throughout. In comparison Edison encourages Tanner's wildly unlikely dreams that are built on entitlement and

[57] Ibid., 104.
[58] Ibid., 104.
[59] Michael Kimmel, *A History of Manhood in America*: *A Cultural History* (Chicago: Free Press, 1996), 9.
[60] Ibid., 113.

naivety, as his parents see it: "this pervasive craving to be recognised as special amounted to an abdication of power, an outsourcing of your core responsibilities".[61] Tanner's future represents Fletcher's legacy in the next generation, and indeed a reaffirmation of his own choices.

Edison's self-immolation is represented most clearly in episodes of bingeing. Pandora notices particularly unpleasant foodstuffs that go missing and that leave her feeling "haunted" through their consumption.[62] She notes the tahini that would stick in a "heavy, dry bottom layer" in the throat, and wheat germ that leaves her "pained" at how "pleasureless" that must taste.[63] Nowhere can this be seen more clearly than when Pandora interrupts Edison while he is in the middle of one of his secret binges:

> For a moment I stood in the kitchen doorway and watched. Our wooden prep island was littered with bottles. The sides of the depleted Karo were glistening… Syrup from earlier in the pillage glued the white powder to his chin in an homage to Santa Claus. The sugar talcumed his hair, aging the tufts at his temples ten years. It snowed over the cuffs and roll collar of his ubiquitous black cardigan. It dusted the toes of his broad, snub-toed black shoes and a three-foot radius of terra-cotta floor tiles.[64]

In *She's Come Undone* Dolores's most violent act of bingeing is when she feels overwhelmed with fear for the future when she graduates from school and internalizes her feelings by bingeing on a large uncooked roast beef. In *Big Brother* Edison's binge incorporates elements of childish play and a murder horror scene – and perhaps, more accurately the jarring merging of both. The gloopy, thick liquid texture of the syrup and the "three-foot radius" of sugar evokes sinister images of blood (and a

[61] Ibid., 114.
[62] Ibid., 114.
[63] Ibid., 114-115.
[64] Ibid., 115.

comic-book representation of toxic waste). In contrast to Dolores's binge in private, Edison is caught and in this moment he becomes a spectacle. Shriver's gory depiction of Edison's binge-eating further frames Edison's obesity as a disastrous event, reflecting Nixon's argument that there is a reluctance to think of disaster events outside of "the paradigm of the spectacle".[65] This is offset by Edison's description as Santa Claus, a figure of generosity and goodwill and child-like wonder. This episode reveals Pandora's difficulty in interpreting Edison in relation to concepts of victim/threat, innocence/sin and pleasure/pain that dominate descriptions of his visit.

Edison's visit turns literally destructive when he begins damaging parts of the home. The battle between Edison and Fletcher extends beyond the kitchen and into other areas of the home: "My brother was not a physically careful person, which had for weeks expressed itself in a series of small damages that still added up to a sustained sense of violation".[66] Edison's destructive presence reaches its climax when he breaks one of Fletcher's beloved items that adorn the family home. Fletcher's chair, affectionately called "the Boomerang", is invested with symbolic importance as "a talisman" offering early material proof that Fletcher has "got the goods" as a craftsman.[67] Fletcher goes on a diatribe against Edison that results in him storming out of the house, with Pandora and Cody in tow. Pandora explains the significance of the Boomerang in terms of a death: "To Fletcher, breaking that chair is worse than breaking his arm. The Boomerang is a ward, a responsibility. He feels he wasn't looking out for it. I wouldn't compare a chair to a child, but he was still – bereaved".[68] Fletcher consolidates his artistic, familial and civic values in one form – his products. Fletcher's productions are depicted as objects with life in them, which is

[65] Nixon, 3.
[66] Shriver, *Big Brother,* 118.
[67] Ibid., 17.
[68] Ibid., 126.

clear when Pandora says, "[I]t's like we have a dead body in the living room".[69] Fletcher's furniture and the Boomerang is an extension of Fletcher himself. Pandora recalls: "I honestly believe he did experience Edison's overeating as a form of assault".[70] The destruction of the chair is the pinnacle of Edison's destructive presence in the home.

As much as Pandora sympathises with Edison and resents the reaction he receives from others, she also struggles to overcome her own issues with self-perception and self-acceptance. Overweight at 168 pounds, Pandora's unease with her own weight and age are of equal concern in *Big Brother*: "I could probably arrange my every photo in a precise order of preference that would perfectly correspond to a continuum of my size. The most beloved are those from the Breadbasket years, when I was gaunt, which makes me look sexless and insignificant. I don't care. Being underweight might not be fetching, but it still strikes me as a badge of nobility".[71] Fat is something specific in *Big Brother*, and connotes a series of characteristics, behaviours and myths. Pandora argues fat and thin body shapes are identified through "a constellation of character traits – a set of stock qualities that, with no other information to go on, we impute to size".[72] Shriver explores the difficulty in moving beyond the assumptions that Murray highlights around size in US culture, even when a person is aware of how these assumptions are based on stereotypes. Even though Pandora attempts to relate to Edison's position, she still finds it difficult to move away from her association with thinness as both desirable and good. Pandora's conflicting views of fatness, as both a theorised idea and a personal reality, emphasises a common contradiction in attitudes to weight in US culture that is at the

[69] Ibid., 131.
[70] Ibid., 129.
[71] Ibid., 137.
[72] Ibid., 140.

core of this novel. Even when she rationalises that weight is not a marker of morals and personal codes, she still holds herself up to different standards that run contrary to her own accepted logic, ones that render Edison's weight loss journey an unimaginable outcome.

Edison's two-month visit ends in a double humiliation. Fletcher sends a recent family photo to Pandora and Edison's father that reveals his latest weight gain and leaves Edison bereft of the one aspect of his identity he was holding onto: the continued illusion that he is the man he used to be to his family: "You realise I police my Wikipedia page *every* day? Making sure the picture they're using is still from five years ago… same goes for my Facebook page".[73] Edison wants to keep his memory intact, even if his present reality is dire. Immediately after the argument Edison suffers another humiliation when he floods the bathroom after a bowel movement. Edison figuratively and literally contaminates the home with waste - with the waste culture of show business, the "toxic" and "poisonous" processed food from Hy-Vee, and finally bodily waste. Pandora is alerted by his "cry of despondency so deep that it sounded like less a response to a single calamity than a lament over a whole life".[74] In a rare direct moment between Pandora and Edison, the humiliating incident breaks down the barriers that he has built up and he admits that when he leaves he has nowhere to go and there is no future music tour. Pandora tells him he "can't go on like this," to which Edison expresses his first admission of depression: "Maybe I don't want to".[75]

Pandora is haunted by the knowledge Edison will be leaving to an uncertain future with no job and no home, but when she tells Fletcher the dire situation he gives

[73] Ibid., 151.
[74] Ibid., 152.
[75] Ibid., 155.

her an ultimatum – him or Edison.[76] Pandora chooses between two families – her childhood family and her chosen step-family. At this point the story splits into a parallel alternative story-world in which Pandora risks her marriage and commits her life for one year to helping Edison return to his old weight. This fantasy is a chance to have the visit Pandora did not achieve and root out the cause of his unhappiness: "So when I said I'd miss him, I meant I would miss what we had not experienced, and I don't know what that's called: nostalgia for what didn't happen".[77] Yet this is also a fantasy about Pandora heroically stepping up to the challenge before her. In response to Fletcher's ultimatum, she replies: "I wonder if I need difficulty. And real difficulty isn't something you go out and find, but something, or someone that finds you".[78] The alternate reality sequence, also known as a counterfactual narrative, features Panodra and Edison embarking on a fasting diet they call "uneating". Uneating is a weight loss method that involves surviving on water soluble packets and an all-liquid diet for a period of months. This imaginary sequence of Pandora's is her attempt to imagine what would have happened had she taken the time to invest in her brother's health and to assuage her feelings of guilt and responsibility, but it is also a fantasy of herself as rescuer.

The counterfactual is a form of "narrative refusal", a term proposed by narratology scholar Robyn Warhol-Down to describe an intimation of "what might have been and yet is not" in narrator's commentaries.[79] In her study of Charles Dickens's novels, she demonstrates how by drawing the reader's attention to events that are left out ("unnarration") or that did not happen ("disnarration"), the novels

[76] Ibid., 161.
[77] Ibid., 145.
[78] Ibid., 162.
[79] Robyn Warhol-Down, "'What Might Have Been Is Not What Is': Dickens's Narrative Refusals" in Dorothee Birke, Michael Butter, Tilmann Köppe (eds) *Counterfactual Thinking: Counterfactual Writing* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2012).

create counterfactual storyworlds that prompt us to evaluate the world that is actually presented.[80] The counterfactual in *Big Brother* prompts us to evaluate the world by exploring Edison's weight gain and weight loss and, to return to Fernyhough's suggestion, the "kinds of explanations [that] will ultimately be satisfying to us".[81] Exploring the implications of Fernyhough's claim for this novel, Shriver reveals how explanations of fatness are also intimately tied to imaginative possibilities, and affect the kinds of stories and resolutions writers and readers will find believable. Shriver's counterfactual depicts Edison's weight loss journey towards maturity and recovery but, in a surprising twist, she reveals the sequence to be entirely Pandora's fabrication. Later, Pandora reveals the counterfactual is a form of self-flattery, a story, and "not a convincing one".[82] Pandora's desire to understand her brother's behaviour, and difficulty in doing so, is indicated in her escapist fantasy that becomes gradually more exaggerated and distorted. In doing so, Shriver evokes an alternate storyworld to explore the inadequacy of the kinds of explanations Pandora can find, and imagine, for her brother's death.

The counterfactual is Shriver's attempt to tackle what Nixon identifies as a recurring representational problem of bringing threats that are "low in instant spectacle and high in long-term effects" like the obesity crisis "emotionally to life" because of their lack of visibility and temporal urgency.[83] By depicting then refusing a comforting and satisfying story of weight loss and resolution for Edison, Shriver's evokes refusal and denial as methods through which to generate dramatic urgency and emotional investment. The counterfactual satisfies, then refuses, the reader's logical

[80] Ibid., 228.
[81] Charles Fernyhough, *The Voices Within: The History and Science of How We Talk to Ourselves* (London: Profile Books, 2016), 34.
[82] Shriver, *Big Brother,* 329.
[83] Nixon, 10, 14.

and rational desire to understand Edison's sudden weight gain and the cultural truisms Murray's discusses in relation to a "literacy" around fat. This refusal is an interesting intervention in Norman Holland's concept of stories creating narrative pleasure through latent (hidden) psychoanalytic fantasies.[84] Shriver embeds a self-conscious psychoanalytic fantasy that fulfills all of Pandora's desires for resolving Edison's psychological issues overtly in the novel only to then refuse the pleasure of this psychological journey by revealing it to be a creation. In refusing Edison's weight loss journey, Shriver refuses both rational and conscious as well as psychological and unconscious narrative pleasure. Shriver representation of obesity through negation – what is no longer believable and plausible in fat representations, what stories of fatness no longer depict – creatively responds to Nixon's desire to "make slow violence visible yet also challenge the privileging of the visible". [85]

Pandora believes that in order to embark on an extreme weight loss journey with Edison she has to live with him separately and they have to embark on a physical and psychological excavation. Pandora maintains that in order for Edison to get back to health he will have to "uneat" everything he consumes: "I want you to use this time to think about why you eat, and to reflect on the fact that every morsel you put in your mouth you'll effectively have to spit back out".[86] Although Pandora is risking her marriage for this journey in this alternate storyworld, Shriver shies away from depicting it as a selfless act despite there being "more than a whiff of the maternal about this whole project":[87] "I had always been single-minded in this way, and the blinkered focus was really a form of egotism: *my* project".[88] Edison's weight loss is

[84]
[85] Nixon, 15.
[86] Ibid., 174.
[87] Ibid., 174.
[88] Ibid., 178.

driven by ego and competition for all involved – Pandora sees Edison's health as her 'project'; Edison and Fletcher make a bet that Edison will not make it down to his former weight of 163 pounds, and if he does Fletcher will eat a whole chocolate cake. The power conflicts evident in the kitchen are transferred to Edison's body and his weight loss is a matter of masculine ego.

The counterfactual is a fantasy about escaping the pull and complexity of eating as much as it is about Edison's weight loss. After researching various diet products, Pandora notes, "They only raise the obsession to a power".[89] Pandora argues that it is better to do without food, than monitor food on a daily basis: "I think it's easier, rather than making dozens of tiny, self-depriving decisions a day, to make one big decision".[90] The solution for Edison's overeating comes in the form of a mysterious small local Iowan company called Big Presents in Small Packages (BPSP) who supply the chalky water soluble packages the siblings survive on for several months. The unusual nature of the solution is clear when Pandora first picks up their packages and evokes the curious and magical worlds in Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* and C. S. Lewis's *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe*: "Entering the innocuous storefront with trepidation, I remembered the children's books I used to read to Cody, in which deceivingly unassuming rabbit holes or wardrobes proved portals to another world".[91] Shriver draws attention to the fantastical transformation Pandora is hoping to usher through and suggests this is a venture in which Pandora must exercise caution.[92]

[89] Ibid., 188.
[90] Ibid., 201.
[91] Ibid., 196.
[92] By naming her protagonist Pandora, Shriver evokes the myth of "Pandora's box". In Greek mythology Pandora, a human endowed with unique gifts from all the gods, opens a jar out of curiosity which unleashes all the evils of humanity but quickly closing it, leaves only hope inside.

The fantastical element of "uneating" is offset by examples of prejudicial attitudes towards fat people in various situations from medical treatment to housing. When Edison goes to the doctor to see if he can physically manage a viciously restrictive diet, Pandora notes the tone of her usually neutral doctor is fatalistic, "flip" and "casual" about Edison's health, and that the doctor laughs when he hears about her plans.[93] When they look for a flat they are repeatedly turned down when the landlords see Edison and his heavy frame, but Pandora discovers they have no recourse to claim discrimination: "[W]hen I did some checking, I discovered that the Americans with Disabilities Act didn't cover the obese. Landlords refusing to rent to lard-asses was perfectly legal".[94] In *Big Brother* some harsh material difficulties of life in a fat body are evoked but not disavowed, and Pandora's assumptions behind fat prejudice are critiqued yet also remain fundamentally in place. For instance, when Pandora travels to Big Presents in Small Packages, she pulls herself up for judging the heavy-set receptionist for being a bad advertisement for the company: "having railed so recently against fat discrimination I couldn't have it both ways".[95] Shriver explores in Pandora a contradiction that remains unresolved in US culture and in the novel – a recognition that fat discrimination exists but this gained knowledge does not truly alter one's beliefs or assumptions. The pull of harsh reality is always present in Pandora's alternate storyworld but prejudice is rarely explored as a serious obstacle and primarily adds texture to Edison's successes.

In the counterfactual, Shriver parodies with a light touch the melodramatic style of recovery novels like *She's Come Undone* that can tend toward hyperbolic and stark metaphors and resort to coincidence and fate for meaningful plot advancement.

[93] Shriver, *Big Brother,* 191-192.
[94] Ibid., 193.
[95] Ibid., 196.

Shriver does evokes similar images and metaphors to gesture toward the constructedness of the fantasy. One of these stark metaphors includes intense oedipal dynamics, dramatised in *Big Brother* when the siblings begin their period of "uneating". Uneating is one aspect of a wider period of therapeutic conversation for Edison, in which Pandora imagines getting to the root of Edison's unhappiness and undoing the psychological complexes and neuroses originating in childhood by, it is suggested, their neglectful father, absent mother and fame-saturated childhood.[96] In *Big Brother* Pandora's fantasy mimics a return to the womb for the siblings. The flat they rent is a stark, naked space with no furniture, thus offering a 'clean slate'. The diet involves Edison and Pandora forgoing food entirely and is a figurative return to a pre-oral stage of development in Freudian terms. In Pandora's imagined alternate reality Shriver surfaces a latent (hidden) psychoanalytic fantasy to a more manifest (overt) level. The temporality in the flat is closed off with no food or meals to map the progression of time. A concrete sense of time disappears and the world shrinks to their bodily rhythms with few available distractions. Inhibition deteriorates as bathroom breaks and "rat breath" define most of Edison and Pandora's time.[97] These intense transformational periods are defined by reorganising power relations, contributing to the pleasure of this psychoanalytic fantasy. In *She's Come Undone* Dolores's relationship with her therapist who works to figuratively rewind her childhood speaks to the power relations between patients and doctors, and specifically female patients and male doctors. In *Big Brother* Pandora's uneating fantasy reorders the power dynamics of their sibling relationship: "It's more like going back forty-four

[96] Ibid., 207.
[97] Ibid., 245.

years – and I'm the firstborn". [98] Pandora's fantasy involves replicating and revising a childhood connection where she is the one on top.

The idea that a fat character's weight can be resolved by talking through their issues resonates with knowledge of fat histories that Murray discusses in *The Fat Female Body*. For instance, it speaks to the cultural assumption that fat subjects are fat because they are sad, angry and carrying around a secret trauma and that weight loss is intertwined with psychological complexes. Shriver evokes this cultural understanding when Pandora and Edison embark on their own psychological unraveling when they begin the diet. If a central point of pleasure in reading stories of fatness is the psychoanalytic plot of oral fixation and resolution, Shriver takes this source of pleasure and fulfills it to its limits. The extreme diet breaks down the silence that has existed throughout Edison's visit: "We've been around each other for over two months, and you still haven't talked to me". [99] Edison identifies multiple sources that contributed to his downward spiral, including Pandora's success and his professional failure. Out of all the methods of escape available to him, food is the most accessible and least immediately debilitating: "A large pepperoni pizza, in the scale of things, seemed the least bad option. I could still play the fucking piano".[100] During Edison's heart-to-hearts with Pandora the extent to which his appetite has contributed to his downfall is revealed. He pinpoints the start of his downward spiral into food dependence as the day he sold and "ate" his prized piano – symbolically cannibalising his passion: "It just seemed – like I deserved it, like a good feed was the least I could ask".[101] Pandora's fantasy is intertwined with excavating what food means for her brother and contemplating how to fill the broader emotional gap.

[98] Ibid., 238.
[99] Ibid., 207.
[100] Ibid., 217.
[101] Ibid., 220.

Pandora's fantasy is doubly satisfying because it satiates the logical and rational desire to explain Edison's behaviour (the novel's overt central tension) in a way that fulfills other psychoanalytic pleasures.

In the fantasy Pandora imagines fostering a closer relationship with her brother than she ever had before. Their intimate closed off world is indicated when they reach an advanced stage of fasting and they feel a sense of difference and superiority from other people when they pass restaurants and shops: "We were invincible, like superheroes; we had special powers".[102] The connection is also chemical, with Pandora and Edison oscillating wildly between haughty superiority and deep periods of irritation and depression. Their schedules are defined only by their bodily highs and lows and they retreat into their siblinghood, even missing Christmas at Fletcher's home. Uneating has elements of a drawn-out child's play, which is clear in how Pandora and Edison fetishise food. For example, Pandora and Edison survive on the memory of food by telling stories about their past meals, specifically their favourite dishes from childhood and the texture of breakfast cereals. Pandora explains that the memory of food is their primary form of stimulation: "The memories we trip are hallucinogenic".[103] The connection between food and nurturing that had been so thoroughly destroyed for Edison is re-established in this fantasy. Instead of reading fairytales they read out cookbooks, reveling in mystique, tantalisation and desire as opposed to the satiety that the recipes once represented: "When I was small, he read me *The Little Red Hen*. Now I read him 'Fried Chicken Made Easy'".[104] By turning food into narrative and words into sustenance, the siblings fetishise both the lost object (food) and behind this, the original source of

[102] Ibid., 233.
[103] Ibid., 249.
[104] Ibid., 249.

sustenance: the mother whom Edison and Pandora lost in early adolescence. Although Edison made a literal trip toward home by travelling to Pandora's home in Iowa (the birthplace of their grandparents), it is an act of digesting food in the form of stories that Pandora can imagine a more meaningful return home for her brother.

Edison's recovery involves resolving what Pandora considers his self-obsession. In Pandora's alternate reality Edison's recovery spirals into a fantasy about an idealised version of Edison without his biggest flaws. At this point in the novel Edison has already lost a substantial amount of weight, and it is evident that his bodily change also indicates a personality adjustment. Edison's recovery involves reconnecting with simple pleasures so Pandora sets him up with a job at her company, and later encourages him to reacquaint himself with the piano, but this time for enjoyment and family entertainment only. His outlook changes so dramatically that they can expand their circle to Cody and Tanner, who are finding life with Fletcher increasingly difficult. In stark contrast to Edison's stay at their family home, in the flat they can entertain Pandora's stepchildren without snacks and everyday formalities: "Eradicating the froufrou of hospitality stripped away the chitchat, too – about weather and new shoes. As hostages thrown together with a slop bucket must also have learned, it's amazing how quickly you get down to emotional brass tacks with absolutely nothing to do but talk".[105] The home as well as Edison is undergoing a transformation. The culture of politeness that leaves hard subjects unaddressed is washed away in Pandora's fantasy. When Edison has lost a large portion of his weight Pandora suddenly recognises her brother for the first time. His personality change is represented as a physical change: "And I saw him. I saw Edison, the Edison I remembered. It was as if the man with whom I had in reality cohabited for months

[105] Ibid., 253-253.

now had only just been restored to me after many years of having gone to ground".[106] Edison becomes more familiar to Pandora when he begins to shed some of his more frustrating characteristics.

As Edison embarks on his weight loss journey, his characterisation comes to resemble that of Fletcher – or, rather, the qualities Pandora appreciates most in Fletcher. Pandora's fantasy reflects a reversal of Holland's conception of social and political manifest (overt) content in a dynamic engagement with buried psychoanalytic drive-based fantasies. Instead in *Big Brother* the psychoanalytical fantasy reflects Pandora's non-oedipal social and romantic desires, with her brother as a sublimation of her desires for her marriage and Fletcher's reform. This is most clear in Edison's relationship to cooking as well as eating. As they continue to diet Pandora reaches a dangerously low weight that requires her to begin eating solid foods again. She initially keeps it secret from Edison, equating her secret meals with a secret affair, but he realises and, under the guise of anger, confronts her: "Edison couldn't keep it up, and started to laugh – a huge, rich belly laugh that I hadn't heard in ages".[107] Edison's rediscovered humour is offset by his newfound desire to take care of Pandora by cooking all her meals. Whereas before his role as chef had been a self-destructive act against himself, and others, Edison now embraces a role as chef to nurture and care for others. They begin to entertain Tanner, who is struggling with Fletcher at their home. Edison's weight loss indicates a much more meaningful change in his character and personality, in a way that mirrors Fletcher: "Why, like my successful suitor of yore, to keep from dripping on the floor he now instinctively shook his wet hands splat-splat at the sink before reaching for a dishtowel".[108] Edison

[106] Ibid., 256.
[107] Ibid., 269, 272.
[108] Ibid., 273.

transforms into a new person, or rather, a different one that embodies the best of both men: "He'd grown smaller of girth, but greater of heart".[109] The slightly saccharine imagery in this quotation stands in stark contrast to the jarring image of the razor blade earlier in his visit ("Whenever he ate rich or sweet things around me I got agitated, no less so than if he'd carved himself with a razor blade in plain view").[110] The hyperbolic images in these two moments suggest how Pandora's narration can only imagine Edison in extreme terms in both storyworlds.[111]

The counterfactual sequence is as much Pandora's fantasy about airing and working through, in a dramatic fashion, her issues that lie underneath her marriage than it is about Edison's weight. In this sequence Pandora imagines the situation between Fletcher and his children getting worse without her presence as a mediator. Pandora ventriloquises the tension Fletcher's stranglehold on the home creates for the family through her stepdaughter Cody's visits:

> I can't tell you the relief of plopping into a chair that isn't some sort of *artwork*. Dad's stuff isn't, like, totally uncomfortable or anything, but as soon as you sit in one of those things he starts staring all beady-eyed and shit … So just sitting there I get an anxiety attack. Half the time I can't stand it and just sit on the floor, dig?[112]

In the counterfactual Pandora explores her feelings of disgruntlement that are not otherwise voiced or addressed, particularly in relation to Fletcher's personality. For instance, in a significant episode Pandora imagines going on a bike ride with Fletcher and Edison, an activity that she used to resent because she believes Fletcher used cycling to shut her out. During this ride, it is Fletcher who is left feeling shunned

[109] Ibid., 273.
[110] Ibid., 93-94.
[111] Ibid., 93-94.
[112] Ibid., 281 emphasis in the original.

when Pandora sings songs and answers music trivia with Edison. This episode is imaginary retribution for the strain Fletcher's controlling health regime has put on their marriage and children. This reading is reinforced because the bike ride culminates in Fletcher asking Pandora for a divorce, having waited for her to return for six months. The bike ride is the site where the marriage reaches its crisis point, arguably, in both storyworlds. The counterfactual is a way for Pandora to dramatise the issues that lie under the surface of their sleepy eight-year relationship into a make-or-break narrative plot. Pandora's storyline of marital disharmony reveals how Edison's weight loss transformation is connected to other characters' conflicts with food and control.

The end of Pandora's marriage coincides with Edison's reintroduction to solid food and the final stage of Edison's recovery. Food is a disappointment for Edison when he begins eating again, and signifies only the hardest part of his journey – namely learning that food will be forever ruined for him. Edison's consumption along with Pandora's marital discord signify an uncertain future in which their options are scarily open. At this point the pair is given a broader purpose when a flood stuns the small Iowan community. If uneating is Edison's great unmaking and his "rebirth", then a natural disaster ("the worst flood in Iowa on record") marks Edison's great re-making.[113] Shriver reworks disaster imagery into a symbol of renewal and revitalisation in the counterfactual. In *She's Come Undone* flooding and drowning are associated with fulfilling a perilous family legacy; in *Big Brother* they are tongue-in-cheek symbols of a theatrical re-birth.

[113] Ibid., 311.

Just as the flat becomes a semiotic space for Pandora and Edison, the disaster is a metaphor for Edison's re-entrance into the world. By depicting Edison's uneating and remaking in terms of birth, Shriver brings together these ways of thinking about weight loss as a rebirth and coming to maturity and reveals how neat and improbable they have become. Edison and his weight is associated with disaster imagery again, with the flood and restoration effort representing a stark and dramatic metaphor for Edison's rebirth. In contrast to viral and toxic form of "slow violence" a flood is an example of a disaster as an "instant spectacle" that is easier to see and resolve. In the flood Shriver revises the fantasy of obesity as a disaster, and Edison's recovery, in terms that can fulfill and satisfy what Nixon calls "visual orthodoxies of victory and defeat" rather than representing a "invisible, mutagenic" form of violence that is "open ended, eluding the tidy closure".[114]

The violence of the flood mimics the violence of the original separation from the womb. Edison takes the final steps towards independence from Pandora during the restoration effort, after she has been his carer, financier and disciplinarian for nine months. Edison moves from looking into himself to find the answers he needs to move on to looking outwards, beyond himself and towards other people: "I was moved by how utterly Edison threw himself into the community effort. The brother who arrived nine months earlier would have put his feet up and watched the spectacle gleefully on TV".[115] In the disaster clean up Edison displays a level of empathy that he was hitherto unable to muster. Moreover, Edison's new found emotional depths are in some ways correlated with his budding Midwestern ease. Whereas before he had been a New Yorker through and through, now "as far as Iowa was concerned, Edison

[114] Nixon, 6.
[115] Ibid., 310.

was a convert" in another parallel to Fletcher: "He was starting to see the point of people who talked to each other, even when there wasn't much to say, and he commiserated with displaced or financially devastated neighbors in a spirit that conveyed the flood hadn't happened to him but to us".[116] Pandora's all-encompassing transformation fantasy about Edison begins to fall apart as it extends into all parts of his personality, likes and dislikes. In doing so Shriver parodies transformational stories that invest in metaphors of sudden change.

The decision to focus on the image of the natural disaster is symbolically important for its resonance with community. Pandora's fantasy of Edison's transformation is intertwined with a fantasy of an environmental disaster with effects can be clearly seen and resolved, and a disaster that brings the community together instead of inspiring distance and division. Natural disaster and the process of reconstructing homes allows for moments of purging/breaking through death as a way of life. When faced with families who have lost everything, Edison becomes a comfort to these broken communities by retelling his own journey back from death as a way of life: "A while back, I lost everything I owned myself… You wouldn't think it, but it's cleansing … Suddenly you can be anybody".[117] To return to Nixon's concept of "slow violence", Edison is now part of the effort to help in a disaster zone rather than representing a threatening presence himself. The devastation of the flood washes away everything including, it seems to Pandora, material and psychological baggage. Pandora remarks: "there's nothing like a catastrophe for bringing out warm good humor in people, and the spirit of heave-ho hilarity was contagious".[118] The discourse of contagion is shifted from Edison's lethargy and towards community

[116] Ibid., 318.
[117] Ibid., 321.
[118] Ibid., 321.

spirit. Edison embodies community renewal, which reinforces how Pandora conceives of Edison in only extreme terms – failed citizen/ideal citizen, villain/hero, and problem/solution. The flood simultaneously humbles Edison and the Iowan community by reminding them of their own vulnerability to nature and chance. By evoking natural disaster imagery in Pandora's alternate reality, Shriver draws attention to what some might call cultural disasters, such as the obesity epidemic, whose affects could in theory be managed and preempted by society.

At the conclusion of the counterfactual narrative, Edison has succeeded in reaching his weight loss goal, but as she later notes, Pandora is unable to imagine he could keep up with his second chance at life.[119] The counterfactual sequence ends with Edison relapsing in dramatic fashion by gorging on a giant chocolate cake, revealing how little has truly changed. By reframing the psychoanalytic oral and oedipal fantasy as one of imagined spectacular failure, instead of success, Shriver offers a different source of pleasure in relation to Holland's concept of story as fantasy by refusing a psychologically satisfying story of recovery and resolution for a comforting story that justifies Pandora's ultimate inaction when faced with Edison's health crisis. At his one-year "new body" party, organised by Pandora to celebrate and show off Edison's journey, Pandora makes amends with her husband and decides to return to her family home now that Edison's weight loss journey is over. When Pandora re-enters the room with Fletcher, she arrives to find Edison bingeing on chocolate cake out of spite for her decision to leave their siblinghood: "Fletcher was standing stock-still, lips parted, as if mesmerized by the gruesome climax of a horror movie".[120] Imagery of violence around bingeing returns, but this time without any

[119] Ibid., 367.
[120] Ibid., 351.

innocent undertones: “his right hand was gucked with icing and clinging crumbs to the third knuckle … the cream shirt with its tracery of musical scores was marred down the front with chocolate stains”.[121] The chocolate is smeared on his hands and body like blood. The act also resonates with a scene of public self-harm, and even self-cannibalism: “his teeth were black in the interstices with chocolate”.[122] In this episode Edison is depicted in terms of savagery and atavism: “The smears around his mouth were brown, not red of course, but still reminded me of a coyote’s bloodied snout when stuck into a cow”.[123] Even within this alternate reality Pandora cannot imagine Edison overcoming his true problem: himself. His journey to maturity concludes with a return to the beginning, with him regaining all the weight he lost in a matter of months. The pleasure Pandora receives in the fantasy through Edison’s spectacular, gory failure is not psychoanalytic, but social and romantic, in the affirmation of her choice to prioritise her romantic and marital love with Fletcher.

In Pandora’s exaggerative counterfactual Shriver explores the limits of the transformative weight loss journey. Ultimately, Pandora is unable to imagine a different ending for Edison, in her real and storyworlds, because of his natural inclinations to excess. Edison is presented as having innate qualities that trigger his destructive path and lie at the centre of his personality. Shriver refuses to satisfy the cultural body “literacy” around fat by playing out then denying a narrative that successfully changes Edison’s behaviour by excavating his psychological fixations and cultural catalysts. His preoccupation with fame remains a mysterious and destructive drive that comes from within and is only catalysed by his heredity causes, environment and chance: “Aside from the obvious competition with my father, I was

[121] Ibid., 352.
[122] Ibid., 352.
[123] Ibid., 352.

mystified why my brother wanted so badly for other people to know who he was. I could see coveting recognition for his talent, but that wasn't what made him tick".[124] Shriver points to the convenience of this belief rather than a true belief in the fatalism of Edison's situation. Pandora explains she chose this ending for Edison to forgive her own lack of action: "I was letting myself off the hook. *See? However extravagant, your intercession wouldn't have worked anyway. It never does, does it?*"[125] Shriver also notes that she does not know if Edison's fate was that determined by his natural inclination toward excess: "Of course, there are plenty of heroic exceptions to those gargantuas who lose hundreds of pounds and then on average gain back all but seven, but I never attempted to discover if my brother might be among them".[126]

At the novel's close Fletcher's and Pandora's family are not as fixed and trapped by their natures as the novel had previously suggested. Fletcher is also characterised as a person whose "nature errs" in the direction of extreme regimentation. Edison remarks: "You don't get that way in an afternoon. That guy," Edison grumbled, "has always had a 'control' thing.'"[127] However, Fletcher loses his healthist obsession after getting a taste of his own medicine when Pandora goes on a restrictive diet:

> I did eventually starve off about fifteen "big ones," not through any all-liquid diet but the conventional stinting portions… Experiencing the same mutinous reaction to my mortification of flesh as I had to his own puritanism, at last Fletcher grew less militant about food. With the miraculous resurrection of

[124] Ibid., 30.
[125] Ibid., 367.
[126] Ibid., 367.
[127] Ibid., 82.

> manicotti, Cody and even Tanner on his return from L.A. made fewer excuses to skip the family meal.[128]

Pandora's weight loss journey, such as it is, is moderate, slow and ultimately unrewarding. While it is far from radical size acceptance *Big Brother* ends on a chord of moderation and body acceptance that is a small win for Pandora who otherwise associates thinness with a badge of nobility. The family has a regulating effect on its members that encourages flexibility, reflection and accommodation. Not only is Fletcher able to change, but Tanner, after going through "a protracted and largely awful" internship with Pandora's father, does eventually come back to Iowa and finish high school.[129] Exchanging his hopes of Hollywood fame for television, Tanner loses "the narcissism that marred him in high school" and ends as a runner for HBO.[130] Pandora learns not to be "pre-disappointed" in Cody and Tanner, while wallflower Cody – already a pillar of kind-hearted virtues – remains the same without mastering a huge boost of confidence as suggested in the counterfactual.[131] The fostering of virtues in this scene is not glamorous, or creative, but indicative of hard work, sociality, and kindness. The family not only move on but thrive, in very ordinary, incremental ways (evidenced by Pandora's weight loss through restricted portions). At the end of the novel, it is Pandora and Fletcher who are capable of learning, developing and changing.

In conclusion, *Big Brother* represents an important development in literary representations of fatness that explores an increasing fearful body literacy about fatness in US culture. By examining the fat body as a contaminant, I have shown how Shriver explores the tensions between a popular medical discourse about health and

[128] Ibid., 363-4.
[129] Ibid., 371.
[130] Ibid., 371.
[131] Ibid., 371.

size, and the ways in which this problematically renders the recovery and even the voice of the super-obese person's figure alien and unimaginable. In contrast to earlier portrayals of fatness examined in this thesis, Pandora's narrative reveals a story of an anti-journey, or refused journey, where the fat character's (or fattest character's) motivations are mysterious and absent. The failed or refused attempt for Pandora to "read" the body troubles cultural "literacy" around fat bodies and shows how it limits the types of possibilities and realities that can be imagined in novels about sick, or presumed sick, characters.

Conclusion

Fiction, Gender and Size

In August 2017, the *New York Times* published an article entitled "Losing it in the Anti-Dieting Age". Written by Taff Brodesser-Akner the article opens with the story of the senior vice president of weight loss company Weight Watchers, Deb Benovitz. In 2015 Benovitz was watching sales steadily fall for the fourth year running, and to combat this decline in revenue she set out to interview members and former members about their increasing desire to leave behind the idea of weight loss. What she found was a discursive move from dieting and weight loss to wellness and mindfulness: "They wanted to become 'healthy' so they could be 'fit'. They wanted to 'eat clean' so they could be 'strong.'" The company's bottom line was eventually saved by none other than America's most famous serial dieter, Oprah Winfrey, who was looking for a solution to a new bout of weight gain.[1] Although Winfrey and Brodesser-Akner, along with many other people, had experienced the highs and lows of yo-yo dieting, they could not shake the promise that a thinner body implicitly offers. "She [Winfrey] told me she doesn't care if she's never skinny again. She cares that she feels as if she has control. For her whole life, she said, her only goal has been to find a higher level of consciousness, to remain more in the moment than she has ever been in any other moment". Brodesser-Akner could not unite self-acceptance with her lived bodily and social reality either:

[1] Taffy Brodesser-Akner, "Losing it in the Anti-Dieting Age" *New York Times* (2 August 2017) https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/02/magazine/weight-watchers-oprah-losing-it-in-the-anti-dieting-age.html (accessed 17 August 2017).

> I could be enlightened about my body. I could have acceptance. But nobody would tell that to the people who saw me as a target; nobody would tell that to my knees. And yet, I told Oprah, in admitting this, I couldn't stop myself feeling as if I were betraying everyone I knew who was out there trying to find peace with herself.

Oprah's and Brodesser-Akner's stories suggest that the repackaged Weight Watchers had achieved the aim outlined on their website, which claims "You'll meet an instant support network of people on the same journey as you" and did so by linking 'self-improvement' to weight loss as a long-term lifestyle choice.

The "journey" of weight loss and the psychological transformations it represents speak directly to the central themes developed in this thesis. The pursuit of a new beginning recalls Joan Foster's weight loss journey and leaving home. The desire for control is reminiscent of Dolores Price's psychological and physical transformation in therapy. That Brodessor-Akner is torn between accepting her body but falls back into cycles of self-restriction recalls Carline's non-linear journey of self-acceptance. The exasperation with the seemingly simple act of eating resonates with Edison Appaloosa's bingeing without tasting and the corrosive impact that Fletcher's pursuit of fitness has on family life. In Brodesser-Akner's article there is the pursuit of a better relationship to self and body combined with the difficulty of achieving or sustaining what this transformation represents, a motif observed repeatedly in the examination of fat women's journey narratives since the emergence of the fat acceptance movement in the late 1960s.

This thesis has uncovered a stronger sense of the cultural and literary significance of the fictional journeys of fat women characters, as well as the role of

fiction in imagining new possibilities and cultural imaginaries of gender and size. From 1976 to 2013, fat women were imagined in a variety of transformational journeys framed around maturity, recovery, community and family, and this was particularly evident in North American fiction. Although fat characters always begin their stories in pain or turmoil – whether as the result of traumatic events, cultural alienation, or social stigmatisation – characters embark on bodily and psychological journeys that involve negotiating painful pasts, trials of gender and sexual visibility, difficult and convoluted paths to self-expression, and a divided sense of self. These troubled and often unfinished journeys towards self-acceptance are defined by an evolving sense of selfhood and individual worth which is uneven and hard-earned, whether with or without the physical change of weight loss. Therefore, the emergence of a fat-acceptance movement as I established in Chapter One, understood through an analysis of fictions of fatness, is characterised as much by persistent and creative attempts to undermine myths of transformational change and total self-control as it is by activist attempts to educate and to counter social and medical stigma. By shifting the focus to bodily journeys, this thesis has not only provided a more complete sense of how novelists since the 1970s have engaged with gender and size, but offered a fresh perspective on how myths of fatness have worked within fictional representations of weight loss.

A close analysis of representative texts from different decades reveals similarities in representations of fat female characters between the 1970s and 1990s in terms of key relationships, images, and themes. For instance, my examinations of Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle* and Wally Lamb's *She's Come Undone* reveal how fat female characterisation is intertwined with adolescence and reflect how weight is related to intense, matrilineal relationships. In these novels the negative association of

fatness with immaturity and psychological damage is integrally related with the protagonist's retrospective narrations of childhoods that are pockmarked with painful experiences and social alienation. Fatness is a state associated with adolescence and dependence, and in Dolores's case, repression. Weight loss in both novels involves gaining new knowledge about the world, as a woman in Joan's case, and oneself and one's family, in Dolores's. The tension between knowledge and ignorance is a central theme as Joan and Dolores go out into the world and conceive of themselves as divided subjects and deceivers. The weight loss transformations in each text reveal an uncertainty of identity and self. The circulatory paths of their protagonists disrupt their development towards coherent selfhood and the self-knowledge that defines literary constructions of the *Bildungsroman* and its subgenre "recovery novels", and create stories of gender and size that lean into the ambiguities of bodily change.

Atwood and Lamb's novels are particularly notable for the ways in which fat female characters are depicted as playful and complex through satire and intertextuality. Atwood's novel incorporates elements of the gothic, romance and the *Bildungsroman*, and creates in Joan a character who is continually recreating and expanding her identity. Atwood's Joan is a trickster, capable of lending herself to any number of creative reinventions. In a different kind of doubling, Dolores is a site of personal, familial but also literary recovery of formerly voiceless abused girl characters. Lamb's intertextual resonance with Nabokov's *Lolita* uncovers how Dolores's embodied journey represents a reparative journey for herself, her community and a literary and cultural past of silence and complicity in violence. Atwood's depiction of Joan's reckless, ambiguous playfulness is far from the symbolic possibilities Lamb creates in Dolores but collectively they suggest distinct experiments with imaginaries of gender and size between the 1970s and 1990s.

Chapters Four and Five explore fat characters and their difficulties with self-acceptance. Although Susan Stinson's *Venus of Chalk* and Lionel Shriver's *Big Brother* consider fatness in two very different frames, they both explore the impossibility of weight loss. These depictions focus on adult women and their relationships to their bodies and the large bodies of others. The interpersonal impact of how we conceive of our bodies impacts on others and our judgements of others. These novels move away from defining relationships between parents and siblings or even the quiet significance that can emerge between near strangers in a period of vulnerability. In Carline's characterisation Stinson self-consciously draws attention to her experience moving through the world as a fat person, and pursuing movement as a form of escape. Themes of mobility, or a lack thereof, also saturate Pandora's description of her brother who struggles to stand, walk and sleep. Although these are polarised concepts, on the surface they speak to the significance of space and place in more recent depictions of fatness. Mobility is a theme in these novels that gestures towards how fat people negotiate the world differently because of their size or, as in Edison's case, represent a burden for other people because of their size.

A surprising but also important development in the twenty-first-century novels analysed is the sensationalist descriptions of the fat body that reveal new engagements with the body's materiality. Stinson and Shriver linger on the surface of the fat body, as either desirable or disgusting, which challenges assumptions of fatness as sick, ugly and grotesque by either refusing them completely, as in Carline's characterisation, or reflecting them to exaggeration, as in Edison's. In these novels there is more awareness of the interpersonal impact of how a person conceives of their bodies, and how it impacts onothers.

The discussion of fat in fiction is a live one. For example, within the last two years two novels have been published that depict another turn in the road in fat women's representation. Lauded in *The Cut* as "2015's Most Surprising Book About Women", Sarai Walker's *Dietland* (2015) focuses on 300-pound narrator Plum and her experience after stumbling into a women's vigilante group called "Jennifer" that enacts revenge on abusers and attacks "rape culture".[2] "Jennifer" irrevocably changes Plum's life being oriented around her dissatisfaction with her body and upcoming gastric bypass surgery.[3] The story blends chick lit and a satirical feminist revenge fantasy and replaces transformation through weight loss with cartoonish revenge plots on rapists, pornographers and other perpetrators of abuse (replacing women's increasingly harmful beauty practices with satirical depictions of women's revenge). Another recent fiction that demonstrates that the trend that I have identified in this thesis both continues and continues to change is Mona Awad's *13 Ways of Looking at a Fat Girl* (2016), widely and positively reviewed in the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, *Time Magazine*, *The Washington Post* and *Elle* for its unsentimental depiction of a fat woman's story. Awad focuses on Lizzie Smith across 13 chronological chapters, and her multiple experiences of fat-phobia and weight loss. Awad challenges stereotypes of fat women as sexually naïve and undesirable (the second chapter switches to the perspective of a boy using Lizzie for sex until he realises she

[2] Elisabeth, Donnelly, "Is Dietland 2015's Most Surprising Book About Women?" *The Cut* (31 December 2015) https://www.thecut.com/2015/12/this-2015s-most-surprising-book-about-women.html (accessed 14 August 2017). *Dietland* was also reviewed in *The Guardian* by Lydia, Kiesling "Dietland by Sarai Walker review – gleefully censorious of 'rape culture'" *The Guardian* (11 June 2015) www.theguardian.com/books/2015/jun/11/dietland-sarai-walker-review-rape-culture (accessed 14 August 2017); Annalisa Quinn, "Fat Is Not A Four-Letter Word In 'Dietland'" *NPR*, (27 May 2015) www.npr.org/2015/05/27/408296085/fat-is-not-a-four-letter-word-in-dietland (accessed 14 August 2007); Kayl Tanenbaum, "What You Need to Know About 'Dietland', Sarai Walker's Debut Novel." *Man Repeller* (24 May 2016) www.manrepeller.com/2016/05/dietland-sarai-walker.html (accessed 14 August 2017). AMC are adapting the book into a series for 2018. "AMC green-lights series based on satiric novel 'Dietland'" *Chicago Tribune* (30 July 2017) www.chicagotribune.com/entertainment/tv/ct-dietland-amc-series-20170730-story.html (accessed 14 August 2017).

[3] Sarai Walker, *Dietland* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2015).

is using another boy in the same way). Magical thinking infuses Lizzie's relationships with clothes and female friendships in particular, areas that I judge will be rife for academic exploration over the next decade. These novels reveal how writers are experimenting with stereotypes of the characterisation of fat women. Furthermore, the stories in which they appear to offer an intriguing development of the themes explored in this thesis.

In August 2016, Juan C. Velasquez-Buritica reviewed *13 Ways of Looking at a Fat Girl* in *Fat Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Body Weight and Society*. The review of fiction in this journal is very unusual– despite the interdisciplinary focus of the publication–and suggests the ways in which Awad's book, praised for offering a more nuanced depiction of fatness, was noteworthy for academics working in Fat Studies. "It is not a secret," Velasquez-Buritica writes in his review, "that in the genealogy of English Literature, fat individuals have been written more as literary symbols of laziness, decay, and unhealthiness than as, well, real people".[4] The criticism of fictional depictions of fatness in 2016 echoes Elana Dykewomon's 2014 article "In Search of the Fabled Fat Woman", which puts in plainer terms the distrust that exists around novelists and depictions of fat: "[M]ost writers, when focusing on fat or disability, treat us to an extended bass solo. It will work for a short story if well-played, but becomes tedious over a long stretch, one-dimensional. Fat women must be whole, and that appears to be a lot to ask".[5] This thesis has challenged the belief that novelists' depictions of the fat body reflect only reductive and pathologising images, and argued that these depictions are not conscious choices by writers to critique the cultural assumptions behind that dehumanisation. Rather than viewing sad and

[4] Juan C. Velasquez-Buritica, "13 Ways of Looking at a Fat Girl, by Mona Awad" *Fat Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Body Weight and Society* 6.1 (2017), 109.
[5] Elana Dykewomon, "In Search of the Fabled Fat Woman" *Fat Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Body Weight and Society* 3.1 (2014), 4.

disturbing fictional depictions of fatness as fostering a pathologising gaze towards fat women, “New Body, New Me?” demonstrates how fiction cultivates imaginaries of fatness and explores the challenges for fat women in society and in the literary imagination. The myth of transformational change is a distinctive element in imagery representing the contested subject-hood of fat women. By mapping this trend in fat representations that is currently overlooked in existing scholarship, this thesis has identified how sometimes satirical, painful, or triumphant depictions imagine new possibilities and expressions for the contested subject position around gender and size.

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