Every woman wants to be skinny, right?: a critical examination of the fat female body within Bigger Girl Lit

by
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To my little Loki – who sat patiently by my side throughout this whole process.

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"General experience indicates that 'husky' girls – those who are just a little on the heavy side – are more even tempered and efficient than their underweight sisters.

– Sanders, L.H. "1943 Guide to Hiring Women."
Mass Transportation Magazine, July 1943. 244.

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An Introduction to Chick Lit and Bigger Girl Lit

In a recent *Toronto Star* article entitled "Pink Inc.," Sharda Prashad describes Chick Lit as a genre of "sassy novels geared toward urban women in their 20s or 30s usually focused on love, career and friends" (A18). Prashad briefly discusses the inception of the genre and the role that marketing has played in its expansion, writing that "Chick lit has been a cash cow for publishers, book retailers and even moviemakers" (A18). Yet, in spite of the genre's popularity, or rather because of its mass appeal, scholars have classified the genre as "trivial fiction" and, until recently, little academic attention has been dedicated to this area (Ferriss and Young 2). However, as the publication of *Chick Lit: The New Woman's Fiction* indicates, Chick Lit is becoming increasingly appealing to literary scholars. Editors Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young argue that "a serious consideration of chick lit brings into focus many of the issues facing contemporary women and contemporary culture – issues of identity, of race and class, of femininity and feminism, of consumerism and self-image" (2-3). Drawing on the popular Chick Lit website Chicklit.us, Ferriss and Young explain that the genre "reflects 'the lives of everyday working young women and men' and appeals to readers who 'want to see their own lives in all the messy detail, reflected in fiction today'" (3). The introduction to their anthology explores the rapidly expanding genre, tracing its roots to the mid 1990s with the publication of Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary*, a novel narrated by a white, middle-class, heterosexual female protagonist struggling to achieve a perfect life which includes monetary independence, a successful career, and a satisfying love life. As indicated on the reverse side of the novel, *Bridget Jones's Diary* is marketed as a must-read novel that "any woman who has ever had a job, a relationship or indeed a mother will read [. . .] and roar" (Hornby, *The Times*): a very troubling

statement which raises concerns among feminists who feel that Chick Lit novels present Woman as a universal and essentialist construct.

Addressing the probability that Chick Lit perpetuates an essentialist female experience, critics like AuthorsOnTheWeb.com have sought explanations from the authors of Chick Lit texts. In February 2004, in an interview-style roundtable, sixteen Chick Lit authors provided their opinions on the posed question: "Is there a Chick Lit formula, or certain 'must haves?'" with varying responses. While the group remains relatively split in the debate, the overarching response is that there are essential elements that every Chick Lit novel must have. As such, Chick Lit texts feature young female protagonists typically living in urban settings, whose stories mainly focus on their career and love/sexual relationships. Rather than being perfect, these first-person narratives are chock full of witty, sarcastic humour as the protagonists fumble through social and professional trials and tribulations. Despite claims from some Chick Lit authors who argue that there is no formulaic process involved in the creation of a Chick Lit novel, it is evident that some mandatory criteria exists, as all seem to agree that "Chick Lit characters need to live in the same world that the readers do—the real world. From the smallest of nuances to the most careful considerations in the plot line, it's all about reminiscence. The best Chick Lit characters are those who are familiar; with echoes of the reader herself" (Krantz, "Chick Lit Roundtable")[1]. Chick Lit protagonists propagate an essentialist womanliness that demonstrates what is naturalized as "female" in the twenty-first century. But what about those women who cannot identify with the characters of Chick Lit? What of those readers who challenge these apparently normal female experiences?

[1] Chick Lit has been likened to the Romance genre insomuch as both have been recognized for their formulaic structures, and while similar criticisms have been made between the genres such discussions are beyond the scope of this study.

The answer to this question comes in the form of Chick Lit sub-genres. As the popularity of the genre has encouraged the publication of more Chick Lit titles, the narrow scope has exploded into a plethora of sub-genres including, for example, Chica Lit, Sistah Lit, and Bigger Girl Lit as authors have begun to experiment with different races, cultures, and bodies, thereby reinforcing the misconception that these Other women are similar to the "normal" woman, but not the normal woman. Publishers and authors agree that since its inception in the mid 1990s, Chick Lit has grown to the point that "[t]here is something for everyone now" (ChickLitBooks.com). Sustaining similar themes of career and love as found in Chick Lit, Chica Lit features Latina protagonists, and includes Alisa Valdes-Rodriguez's novel *The Dirty Girls Social Club*, while Terry McMillin's *Waiting to Exhale* has been categorized as Sistah Lit because it portrays the experiences of African-American female protagonists battling similar demons as their white counterparts. In her essay "Sistahs Are Doin' It for Themselves," Lisa A. Guerrero examines "how race socially, politically, and historically informs the ways in which these two powerhouse genres and their heroines diverge, especially in their attitudes toward and relationships to men, marriage, and the struggle for worth, fulfillment, and respect" (88). She explains that Chick Lit signals the emergence of a new woman that must be represented in contemporary fiction: "[t]he women who had fought for equality in the 1960s and 1970s now had daughters who were reaping the rewards of those struggles and claiming a stake in society, ostensibly on their own terms. [Chick Lit] was their literature" (88). Differences that exist between the narratives are bridged by normalizing hetereosexuality; however, despite having similar themes, the sub-genres mark crucial differences that exist between women, specifically in relation to race and class. As Guerrero argues, Chick Lit protagonists are "white and generally middle class" (88), and while many can "relate to Bridget Jones and other literary chicks, it is

more difficult to *see* themselves in these white heroines" (91) because not every woman experiences the same privileges that are associated with whiteness and bourgeois status. Chick Lit novels appear to encompass a specific female experience, but in doing so they marginalize all those women who are not represented by their protagonists. While the sub-genres attempt to rectify Chick Lit's constricted representations of the female experience by emphasizing racial and economic diversity, the creation of these alternative characters, despite their different racial, cultural, and economic backgrounds, continues to reaffirm a heterosexual universalization of female experience, and consequently substitutes one stereotype for another.

Chick Lit and sub-genre protagonists are bound by society's ideals of what is desirable and valuable. This is made most explicitly through the representation of female bodies, and of the protagonists' response to their own (and other women's) bodies, especially body sizes. In *The Beauty Myth*, Naomi Wolf writes: "[r]ecent research consistently shows that inside the majority of the West's controlled, attractive, successful working women, there is a secret 'underlife' poisoning our freedom; infused with notions of beauty, it is a dark vein of self-hatred, physical obsessions, terror of aging, and dread of lost control" (10). Wolf's comments relate directly to Chick Lit novels; throughout many of the narrations similar concerns about the body are evident. In her essay, "Supersizing Bridget Jones: What's Really Eating the Women in Chick Lit," Alison Umminger argues that Chick Lit demonstrates a new problem not present in previous women's fiction: behind the incessant search for the perfect mate/job/life, these protagonists have a ceaseless internal struggle with themselves. Umminger writes: "While the Bridget Jones's [. . .] of the new millennium are free agents relative to their sister characters of past centuries, their freedom is mitigated by the self-imposed and culturally sanctioned tyranny

of hating their own bodies" (240). Ferriss and Young remind critics that the topics these novels refer to mirror feminist discourses of gender and the body that have existed for decades:

> Chick lit's concern with shopping, fashion, and consumerism leads to an arguable obsessive focus on skin-deep beauty. From the moment of Bridget Jones's opening diary entry—"29 lbs[2]. (but post-Christmas)" – chick lit has emphasized women's appearance and, more specifically, weight. The intimate connection between a woman's appearance and the chances of her (real or perceived) success in bedrooms and boardrooms is an issue that has long been central to discussions of feminism. (11)

Chick Lit novels emphasize issues and frustrations with appearance, sex, and gender –all of which play an important role in how women experience and understand their bodies. Weight is a common theme in Chick Lit, and as demonstrated in the above quotation, Bridget struggles with food and her weight throughout the text, yet her "sense of inferiority is determined by her distance from marriage," not solely on her body size (Guerrero 99). Bridget's perceived subordinate position in contemporary life is primarily due to the fact that she is single, and while she perceives her weight to be a reason she is single, it is merely one of many characteristics that she believes contributes to her singleness. In comparison, Bigger Girl Lit protagonists believe their larger bodies are solely responsible for their perceived miserable lives: these protagonists are convinced that their larger bodies are to blame for their unsuccessful careers and relationships with men.

As aforementioned, weight is a common theme found throughout the genre as a whole, but there are significant differences between the characterizations of Chick Lit and Bigger Girl Lit protagonists. The protagonists of Bigger Girl Lit obsess about their bodies, especially the

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[2] As quoted in Ferriss and Young. Originally published in England, Bridget's weight is measured in stones: "9st 3 (but post-Christmas)" (Fielding 7).

size of their bodies, similar to the ways in which Bridget obsesses over hers; however, these protagonists experience their lives very differently as often times their bodies (or their negative self-perceptions of their bodies) deny them access, both physically and psychologically, to things like sex and trendy fashion, two staple features of Chick Lit. The texts I examine, *Conversations with the Fat Girl* by Liza Palmer, *Alternate Beauty* by Andrea Rains Waggener, and *Good in Bed* by Jennifer Weiner, have all been branded as Bigger Girl Lit, as these novels appear to represent "fat chicks." The female narrators, Maggie, Ronnie, and Cannie respectively, are smart and educated, yet the professions they occupy at the outset of the novels are not their dream jobs. Maggie, in *Conversations with the Fat Girl,* has a master's degree in museum studies yet she continues to work at a coffeehouse, Joe's Joe for the Average Joe, where she has worked since graduation. In *Alternate Beauty,* Ronnie is a retail sales manager of a plus-size clothing store who aspires to become a famous plus-size fashion designer. *Good in Bed*'s Cannie, when she is not daydreaming about taking over the coveted celebrity gossip and entertainment column, writes the wedding announcements for the *Philadelphia Examiner*. All three protagonists desire, often secretly, to attain their dream professions, but feel inadequate and unprepared to seek said professions even though they often have the necessary credentials and receive plenty of support from family and friends who remind each protagonist of her talents. Their insecurities, therefore, stem from the poor self-worth each feels because of her body size. Ronnie, Maggie, and Cannie all believe that they cannot be successful because they are fat, and this is reinforced by observations they make of the skinny women they encounter daily. All three struggle with their careers and relationships with men, and believe that if they were thin, they would be successful. By the end of the novels, the narrators lose weight but conclude that they do not need to be thin to succeed; rather, they need to believe in themselves because they realize that their body sizes

do not reflect their capabilities. By the end of the novels, the protagonists have succeeded either professionally or personally, or both, but because they are also thinner, the message really is that success and thinness are intimately connected. *Alternate Beauty, Conversations with the Fat Girl*, and *Good in Bed* represent alternatives insofar as they seek to represent a fat female experience that must be included within Chick Lit by constructing specifically fat protagonists who share similar struggles with their Chick Lit sisters; however, these novels, although appearing to valorize and represent larger women, regurgitate the same stereotypes of larger women and perpetuate the belief that women must be thin and beautiful in order to be happy and successful.

In order to adequately examine how the female body is represented in Bigger Girl Lit, we must draw upon feminist theory of gender and the body. Various theorists have explored writing on the body from a variety of subject positions, and this field continues to expand at present. For example, Michel Foucault examines the body and how it intersects with power politics and sexuality[3]; Eve Sedgwick and Judith Butler write the body through the lens of queer theory and gender studies[4]; and Susan Bordo and Elaine Ginsberg[5] consider racial and cultural bodily inscriptions. Body discourse has also been examined vis-à-vis a Marxist perspective as demonstrated in Jean-Francois Lyotard's[6] writing on the commodification of the body, while more recently, Donna Haraway[7] examines how the body intersects with technology resulting in a

[3] For further reading of Foucault's work on power and sexuality, see his texts *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975) and *The History of Sexuality* (1976-84).
[4] See Eve Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990) and Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (1993) and *Undoing Gender* (2004).
[5] See Susan Bordo's *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (1993) and Elaine Ginsberg's *Passing and the Fictions of Identity* (1996).
[6] See Jean-Francois Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* (1979).
[7] See Donna Haraway's "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century." *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (1991).

cybernetic body. Finally, the writing of Elizabeth Grosz[8] incites a restructuring of the mind/body dualism, proposing a new perspective of corporeality that does not rely on a mind/body split. With regard to the fat body more specifically, Kathleen LeBesco, Le'a Kent, and Richard Klein[9] employ interdisciplinary contexts in their studies of fatness and how it interacts with ethnicity, race, class, sexuality, psychology and medical discourse resulting in new discourses that speak to those who choose not to confine their bodies to societal constructions. Discourses about gender and the body have captivated both male and female philosophers, and while it has been an important topic of discussion among many feminists throughout all three waves of feminism, these discourses continue to expand at present. Frustrations concerning the body is a theme many feminist theorists, including Simone de Beauvoir, Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Judith Butler have discussed at length. Their writings focus mainly on gender, essentialism, identity, and performance, and are useful when deconstructing how Bigger Girl Lit operates within Chick Lit.

The (thin) One and the (fat) Other

De Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, first published in French in 1949 and strongly influenced by Freud and theories of existentialism, is an important text to consider when discussing the fat female body. De Beauvoir's writing on the positioning of women as subordinate to men connects similarly to the subordination of fat female bodies to thin female bodies because both binaries are based on social-construction that is ordered by the phallus. With the goal of improving the lives of women, de Beauvoir's text is a reaction to the theories of Aristotle and St. Thomas Aquinas that sustain the phallocentric system which she perceives as still governing her

[8] See Elizabeth Grosz' *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (1994).
[9] For further reading on LeBesco, Kent, and Klein, see *Bodies out of Bounds: Fatness and Transgression* (2001).

society[10]. She writes: "humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being" (de Beauvoir xvi). Here, de Beauvoir is referring to Freud's symbolic order of the phallus, where subjects are given value based on having or lacking the phallus. In her article "Seeing 'The Second Sex' through the Second Wave," Mary Lowenthal Felstiner writes that, according to de Beauvoir, "the prevailing inequality between sexes is a social form, not a natural one" (270). For de Beauvoir, the existence of woman is key to the essence of woman, and much of her discussion follows the idea that "[o]ne is not born a woman, but rather becomes, a woman" (de Beauvoir 281), suggesting that at the biological level the sexes are equal; however, a woman is taught her subordinate gender role through social-construction. De Beauvoir makes the distinction that sex is fixed, and woman is subordinate to man only because she accepts the socially-constructed female role of her gender despite the fact that there is no biological reason for this positioning. Should a woman choose to reject the socially-constructed role of her gender, she would be able to escape the trappings of her sex.

Closely linked to de Beauvoir's discussion of the biology of male and female bodies is her discussion of the (essential) One and the (inessential) Other. De Beauvoir argues that, within a male-dominated society, the female sex is forced into the position of the Other because women have "no past, no history, no religion of their own" (xix): "For him she is sex—absolute sex, no less. She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute—she is the Other" (xvi). According to theorists who follow the psychoanalytical

[10] The concept of this thesis became apparent while reading de Beavoir's *The Second Sex.* While the social-constructs of the One and the Other lay the foundational framework for this study, I acknowledge that de Beauvoir's theoretical standpoint privileges the epistemological position of the male and does not account for the other ways of seeing subject positioning.

theories of Freud, Woman is defined in relation to man (as the Other), and de Beauvoir argues that while there is no biological reason why she cannot be the One, society is structured in such a way that renders any attempt to change the position of Woman as futile. She writes: "It is not merely as a body, but rather as a body subject to taboos, to laws, that the subject is conscious of himself and attains fulfillment—it is with reference to certain values that he evaluates himself. And, once again, it is not upon physiology that these values can be based; rather, the facts of biology take on the values that the existent bestows upon them" (36). De Beauvoir argues that women occupy this secondary position of the Other because of social-construction, but also because "[i]f woman seems to be the inessential which never becomes the essential, it is because she herself fails to bring about this change" (xix). According to de Beauvoir, women must reject this social positioning because it has no biological basis, and instead women must claim their place as man's biological equal rather than his Other, thereby challenging the symbolic order that presumes there is a binary opposition based on gender/sex.

Beginning from a similar standpoint, second-wave feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray employs Lacanian psychoanalytic theory in *This Sex Which is Not One* to explore the relationship between the female body and Western society. Whereas de Beauvoir argues that sexual difference between the sexes exists as a result of social-construction, Irigaray, drawing on Jacques Lacan's reading of Freud, argues that sexual difference is allocated through language and understood in relation to the phallus, which controls language. Irigaray argues that Western society is biased against women because of phallocentric language that places the male body at the top of the linguistic and social hierarchies. Irigaray writes: "*the feminine occurs only within models and laws devised by male subjects*. Which implies that there are not really two sexes, but only one. [. . .] This model, a *phallic* one, shares the values promulgated by patriarchal society

and culture, values inscribed in the philosophical corpus: property, production, order, form, unity, visibility . . . and erection" (Irigaray 86, author's emphasis). Irigaray explains that what society upholds as valuable and significant has been determined by men, and in that, only truly valuable and significant to men. Throughout her text, Irigaray argues that until Western culture adopts structures that are not patriarchal, women will continue to be merely the object of men's desire.

Many expectations are forced onto the objectified female body, and the imaginary ideal woman is relatively easy to determine within the pages of Chick Lit. She is featured as the iconic image on billboards and in magazine advertisements that promise whiter teeth, brighter and shinier hair, and haute couture. She is the image plastered over the covers of *Cosmopolitan* and *Glamour* magazines, and the image of perfection that Hollywood and advertisers alike so ingeniously capitalize on at the expense of the white, upper-middle class female protagonists who rush to clothing stores, pharmacies, fitness centers, diet clinics, and doctor's offices to achieve their ideal image of themselves. The protagonists of Bigger Girl Lit are positioned as the Other body (doubly marginalized) because their fat bodies are the antithesis of the ideal one, and as such, the thin/fat binary reinforces the socially-constructed categories that naturalize thin and fat bodies as good and bad respectively. An example of this Othering is demonstrated in the narration of Palmer's protagonist Maggie, who, while sitting with a group of her best friend's skinny friends whom Maggie has just met for the first time, remarks: "I can't help but look around the table and project every single insecurity I've ever felt onto these three strangers. These three beautiful, painfully thin strangers. I can see Big Bird again. 'One of these things is not like the other,' he says. I stand out like a sore thumb. A big, fat, oversized, sore thumb. Sure, I've lost some weight, but compared with these women I am still one word. *Fat*" (264,

author's emphasis). Maggie's poor self-worth, paired with her belief that thin bodies are more desirable and beautiful than fat bodies, reinforces her negative self-perception and causes her to place herself in the subordinate position of the fat Other who does not belong with the rest of the group because of her body size, despite the fact that she is straight, white, of the same age, and upper-middle class status as the other women. Maggie's beauty, personality, artistic talent, education, and even the fact that she is Olivia's best friend are all over-shadowed by her body size as she is only able to view herself as "fat," and therefore ugly, thereby accepting the negative stereotypes that are created by the thin/fat dichotomy. While the size of the female body is not socially-constructed, reactions to the size of the body are. The narratives of Bigger Girl Lit reinforce negative stereotypes associated with the fat female body by associating their failures with their body sizes, an act that perpetuates male-dominated discourse which forces women to compete with each other for the privilege of being sexually objectified and idealized by men. As fat bodies, they are not objects of male desire, but rather than rejecting this negative position they strive to conform to society's, and thus man's, ideas of what is a valuable female body. They conform to reading the female body as a sexual commodity to be used and exchanged in a heterosexual, white, upper class libidinal economy.

By accepting the subordinate position as the Other, Bigger Girl Lit protagonists will not escape oppressive sex/gender discourse. In "The Question of the Other," Irigaray elucidates that, "since the end of the nineteenth century, more attention has been paid to the question of *the other* [. . .] [y]et the fundamental model of the human being remained unchanged: one, singular, solitary, historically masculine, the paradigmatic Western adult male, rational, capable" (7, author's emphasis). Irigaray argues that Western society, rather than examining a subject for what it is, compares everything to a patriarchal ideal: "Others were only copies of the idea of

man, a potentially perfect idea, which all the more or less imperfect copies had to struggle to equal. These imperfect copies were, moreover, not defined in and of themselves, in other words, as a different subjectivity, but rather were defined in terms of an ideal subjectivity and as a function of their inadequacies with respect to that ideal: age, reason, race, culture, and so on" (7). Irigaray argues that it is for this reason that de Beauvoir chooses to place woman next to man as his equal (8); however, doing so raises other difficulties, as she explains: "[t]he question of the other has been poorly formulated in the Western tradition, for the other is always seen as the other of the same, the other of the subject itself, rather than an/other subject [*un autre sujet*], irreducible to the masculine subject and sharing equivalent dignity" (8). For Irigaray, men and women are a product "of the flesh but also of the word, nature but also culture" (11), and therefore Irigaray, and other feminists like Cixous, argue that Woman cannot be defined or understood through male discourse. Works of Chick Lit, which are marketed to predominantly female audiences, are examples of a discourse that reinforces masculine ideas of sex, gender, and heterosexuality. Chick Lit narrators continue to voice a heterosexual and patriarchal ideology that reinforces oppressive, reductive, and essentializing sex/gender roles. The illusion of Bigger Girl Lit is that it appears to offer a space where these boundaries can be transgressed, if not escaped; however, in actuality these novels continue to be confined by the same stereotypical expectations.

Writing the body

In her text "The Laugh of the Medusa," Cixous, an essentialist French feminist and author, encourages women to write their bodies—to tell their bodies' stories[11]. Her central

[11] Hélène Cixous has been criticized for occupying an essentialist theoretical standpoint that deduces women to an essence – a contradictory position given the barriers her text seeks to dismantle; however, her work is still relevant

argument is that "woman must write woman. And man, man" (2041). Her text, first published in 1975, argues against the phallocentric linguistic system that controls and oppresses women. She argues that men have kept writing and language for themselves, and that writing is "marked" by the phallus and "has been run by a libidinal and cultural—hence political, typically masculine—economy" (2042). She further describes patriarchal writing as "self-admiring, self-stimulating, self-congratulatory phallocentrism" (2043). Within the patriarchal discourse of signifier and signified, "woman has never *her* turn to speak" (2043). Cixous' remedy for this silence is "*l'écriture feminine,*" which describes a style of discourse repressed by, and challenging to, the phallocentric symbolic order of language as characterized by Freud and Lacan. *L'écriture féminine* is a form of writing that allows women to generate new systems of knowledge that are not ordered by the phallus, and which can be multiple. By writing this way women will escape the patriarchal language that oppresses them. What exactly such writing is, or looks like, has eluded critics.

According to Cixous, writing comes from within the body and the act of writing generates knowledge; therefore, because women have been denied a language of their own, their bodies have been repressed. Cixous encourages women to write because she believes that writing will free women of this oppression. Cixous writes "about women's writing: about *what it will do*" (2039). She believes that women must write their bodies by destroying libidinal language, and tell their stories because the female body "knows unheard-of-songs" (2040). She argues that because women have not been able to write they have no knowledge or history of their own, and the act of writing will provide women with the opportunity to begin a new history in their own language; hence, *l'écriture feminine* "will always surpass the discourse that

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when reading the female body as portrayed in the Bigger Girl Lit novels selected for this study as these texts also rely on an essential female experience.

regulates the phallocentric system" (2046). Cixous argues that *l'ecriture feminine* is supportive and inclusive, unlike its counterpart, masculine writing, which functions as fixed and finite. Cixous explains her term *l'ecriture feminine,* writing: "[i]t is impossible to *define* a feminine practice of writing" (2046), and as women write themselves the possibilities for feminine language and knowledge is "a multiple and inexhaustible course with millions of encounters and transformations of the same into the other and into the in-between, from which woman takes her forms" (2047), because woman cannot be defined as singular as male discourse portrays her. This giving of knowledge through feminine writing is not structured in the same binary system as masculine language, whereby words are granted meaning and value based on their relation to *the* signifier—the phallus. Cixous warns: "Beware, my friend, of the signifier that would take you back to the authority of a signified!" (2055). Cixous encourages women to break away from binary language which positions women as subordinate to men. She writes: "We must kill the false woman who is preventing the live one from breathing. Inscribe the breath of the whole woman" (2044). According to Cixous, the "false woman" is a woman who accepts her subordinate position as man's Other, and only by dismantling the symbolic order of language will woman be able to free herself of linguistic oppression. In her text "Writing – and Reading – the Body: Female Sexuality and Recent Feminist Fiction," Molly Hite examines "a number of female authors [who] have set out to appropriate [the female] body for their own purposes, writing especially from the standpoint of the woman who experiences herself as sexual, rather than from the standpoint of the outsides who experiences the sexed woman as an object of desire" (121). In support of *l'ecriture feminine,* Hite writes:

> In dealing with the female body from a feminist perspective, fictional writers can also read this body as a social-construct and therefore need not presume an appeal to a "real"

> basis of female experience prior to and unsullied by discursive practice. Instead, such writers are in a position to emphasize the contradictions within the construct, contradictions so acute that they may well make it impossible for anyone to *be* the sexed woman of conventional representation, not because this woman is depicted as experiencing herself in ways that "real" women do not but because she is not depicted as experiencing anything at all. Conceived as essentially the Other to male subjectivity, she is so purely an object that she eludes even imaginative identification. (123)

Bigger Girl Lit texts have the potential to exist outside of male-dominated discourse because the texts present protagonists who exist on the boundary of the category Woman, thus illuminating the contradictions of the rigid female sex/gender role[12]. This otherness gives them the power to exist outside the male-imaginary where they are not bound to the oppressive category Woman as defined by the male gaze. The novels categorized as Chick Lit, although largely written by women for female readers, are examples of discourse that perpetuate Cixous' idea of the "false woman" by reinforcing masculine ideas of sex, gender, femininity, and heterosexuality. This is most evident in the narration of the protagonists. In "Contextualizing Bridget Jones," Kelly A. Marsh writes that Chick Lit protagonists like Bridget Jones are "presented as archetypes of single womanhood even though they are little more than composites of frivolous neuroses" (53), and as such, the universalizing of Bridget's character is problematic because it assumes that all female experiences are comparable to Bridget's experience. But what about the women who cannot identify with Bridget? Chick Lit texts like Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary* do not represent all women, and therefore, while the sub-genres seek to represent those women who do not fit within the category of "woman" defined by Chick Lit, the sub-genres still fail to avoid oppressive

[12] By and large Chick Lit novels, and Bigger Girl Lit novels alike, essentialize the male imaginary to a universal being that does actually prefer thin women.

discourse as their very formation relies on an essential representation to which they can identify themselves as "Other." Bigger Girl Lit relies on the dichotomy of the thin/fat female body for its characterization.

The creation of sub-genres facilitates the categorization of all fictional texts that have been deemed as Chick Lit into specific groupings depending on the voice that drives the narration. When considering Bigger Girl Lit, it is understood that the fat protagonist is the voice for fat women everywhere. Bigger Girl Lit narrators perpetuate an image of the fat woman as one who is limited to her desire to shrink her body, and, marketed as a must read for fat women, these texts present an image of Woman that is singular, thus reinforcing the notion that every woman needs and desires to be thin. For instance, in *Alternate Beauty,* Ronnie explains that her body size has handicapped her ability to be anything other than a "fat woman:"

> The truth was I didn't live, in any way, in the world I wanted to live in. Somewhere along the way, I'd abandoned myself. I knew, of course, that obsessing over my weight, allowing it to overshadow my strengths—my talent, my compassion, and my intelligence—was pure stupidity. But I couldn't seem to help myself. I had bought into the party line—that beauty is everything and fat is ugly. Because I couldn't fit myself into this picture, I'd made myself into a different person than I wanted to be. Instead of
>
> being Ronnie, the talented designer, I'd become Ronnie, the shopkeeper. (Waggener 18)

Ronnie is an educated fashion designer, and even though she desires to design clothing for plus-size women, she is preoccupied throughout the text with the notion that thin is beautiful. As a result of her conditioned thinking, the possibility of being a fat designer who designs plus-size clothing is not acceptable – it is also futile from the get-go in a white, upper class social system in which thin signifies beauty and success. Ronnie's self-aware narration hints at the

ridiculousness of equating her self-worth based on her body size; however, it is clear that she privileges being a fashion designer over a shopkeeper. Because she believes that her body size prohibits her becoming a successful designer, she reinforces the belief that female success is intimately connected to sexual desirability and body size. By limiting the experiences of Bigger Girl Lit protagonists to frantic, obsessive quests for the "perfect" body, the fat female body is not liberated. Cixous' concept of *l'ecriture feminine* appears to be a solution to the Chick Lit sub-genres representational shortcomings as it offers the potential for a different reading experience where characterizations can be multiple; however, it still operates within a binary system, because sub-genre protagonists are viewed as Other to their Chick Lit sisters. As such, Bigger Girl Lit further marginalizes the Othered female identity by trying to negotiate it within the constructs of Chick Lit.

Gender Performantivity

De Beauvoir's and Irigaray's arguments fall short, according to Butler, because they assume that there is an essential Woman that must be represented, rather than argue, as Butler does, that gender itself is impossible to define. Butler explains that gender is a series of performative acts that creates gender, and these acts are socially-constructed, and are therefore patriarchal. Because these performances are socially-constructed, Butler argues the impossibility of an essential gender, as gender is always open to interpretation. Butler's argument stems from de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, wherein de Beauvoir argues that one's sex (and in particular the female sex) is socially-constructed. In her text *Gender Trouble*, Butler echoes de Beauvoir and argues that gender, like sex, is socially-constructed; women and men therefore learn to perform their genders by participating in socially-constructed ideas of what it means to be female and

male. Throughout *Gender Trouble*, Butler claims that feminism has failed women in assuming a common female identity, categorizing men and women separately, based on the role of their sex/gender.

In contrast to de Beauvoir and Cixous, Butler argues that there are crucial differences between Woman and women, and these differences are governed by race, class, and sexuality. She argues that there is no essential Woman, and any conceptualization of a universal Woman is a representation of patriarchal discourse. For instance, Butler addresses de Beauvoir's discourse of socially-constructed sexuality and how one becomes a woman, arguing that while the female sex is socially-constructed, so is the female gender: "If 'the body is a situation,' as [de Beauvoir] claims, there is no recourse to a body that has not always already been interpreted by cultural meanings; hence, sex could not qualify as a prediscursive anatomical facticity. Indeed, sex, by definition, will be shown to have been gender all along" (11). For Butler, "'the body' appears as a passive medium on which cultural meanings are inscribed or as the instrument through which an appropriative and interpretive will determine a cultural meaning for itself" (12); however, in a patriarchal society, sex and gender are intimately connected.

Bringing together the arguments of de Beauvoir and Irigaray, Butler believes that one's gender is fundamentally influenced by one's sex. Butler writes: "if gender is something that one becomes—but can never be—then gender is itself a kind of becoming or activity, and that gender ought not to be conceived as a noun or a substantial thing or a static cultural marker" (152). This statement introduces one of Butler's central arguments—that one performs his/her gender: "There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (34). Men's and women's bodies have specific gendered expectations which are presented as normative practices within the

universal model of heterosexual attractiveness. Gender is performed by following what the bourgeoisie decides is masculine and feminine; therefore, if the sex of an individual is female, then her identity is expected to embody only those characteristics that are associated with femininity—"passive, acquiescent, timid, emotional, and conventional" (Abrams 89), and which are considered to be attractive. The female body must also perform femininity by being small in size, as smaller bodies are more valuable within male-dominated discourse. It is important to remember that not every body is able to (or has the desire to) conform to patriarchal masculine or feminine ideals. In Western culture, the male body is expected to be large and strong, and the female body, by virtue of being the male body's opposite, is expected to be small and weak. In a culture where masculinity and femininity are inscribed on the body, gender performance plays a crucial role in identifying what is considered male and what female. A man will grow a beard or build up his muscle mass at the gym in an attempt to appear more masculine, and, comparatively, a woman will wear make-up and diet to reduce her body in an attempt to appear more feminine. In Bigger Girl Lit, fat bodies can be read as performatives. For example, fat protagonists despise getting out of their comfortable "fat clothes," as Maggie in *Conversations with the Fat Girl* remarks one lazy Saturday afternoon while she is alone in her house: "I promised myself I would not get out of my favourite outfit all day. If I could just walk around in this gray men's tank top and these black terry-cloth pants, I would be the luckiest woman alive" (Palmer 36). Maggie desires to remain in her dark-coloured, formless, men's clothes because her fat body is most comfortable in this attire, and such a desire hints at the possibility that the fat female body has dual gender opportunities; however, because she desires to present herself as feminine rather than masculine, Maggie is not the "luckiest woman alive" because she only permits herself to wear her comfortable clothing, in a kind of drag, in secret. Bigger Girl Lit protagonists, like

Maggie, are denied a feminine appearance because their larger bodies do not permit it, nor are they given an opportunity to play with the possibilities drag offers; when they do try to wear the clothes that other, thinner women are wearing, the protagonists make negative comments that indicate how they detest their bodies because they are not feminine. For instance, while shopping with her sister for an outfit to wear to her best friend's wedding rehearsal, Maggie demonstrates how her fat body attempts to perform thinness:

> I splurge a little and buy a long brown leather skirt and a crisp white shirt. I also purchase what I refer to as a "tightener." This is a magic undergarment that shoves your entire body into a spandex casing and smoothes out where there were once rolls. I get a small. My thought process: If I buy a small, I will become a small. When I finally writhe my way into the tightener, my middle is now a "small." Even if in the end, I look like a slug caught in a straw. (109)

Maggie believes that purchasing a tightener will alter her fat appearance in favour of a more feminine one; she feels she needs a costume in order to properly perform her gender, and that a "small" external garment will brand her body "small." In preparation for her public appearance at her thin best friend's rehearsal dinner, Maggie does not believe that her fat body is acceptable in its natural shape, and therefore opts to enclose her body and hide her form in order to present a body that is more feminine. Her attempt is futile, however, as her body is compared to that of a slug. In her article "Performing Identity: Dawn French and the Funny Fat Female Body," Anne Hole argues that "fat women are denied the possibility of playing with gender, or masquerading as feminine" because they are fat (318), which is reflected in Bigger Girl Lit. As a result, the Bigger Girl Lit protagonists fail to perform their gender "correctly" yet shy away from playing with alternate possibilities.

Working with the belief that gender is performed, Butler argues that men and women can choose to perform gender differently, and in doing so, the boundaries between masculinity and femininity are forced to change. In the context of Bigger Girl Lit, the fat female body problematizes gender performance because hers is a body that does not fit within the boundary of what is considered feminine, and as such she exists only on the periphery. Many feminists, including Julia Kristeva, consider this abjected positioning to be a powerful position because the fat female body evades the simple categorization of what is expected of Woman, and therefore the fat female body has the freedom to challenge the oppressive positioning of the female sex. In her text, *Powers of Horror: an Essay on Abjection,* strongly influenced by Lacan and French deconstruction, Kristeva writes: "what is abject, on the contrary, the jettisoned object, is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses [. . .] It lies outside, beyond the set, and does not seem to agree to the latter's rules of the game. And yet, from its place of banishment, the abject does not cease challenging its master" (230). Kristeva encourages marginalized women to explore the possibilities their abjected status awards them by continuing to challenge oppressive categorizations. Comparatively, Elaine Ginsberg's text, *Passing and the Fictions of Identity,* examines how it is possible for an individual to transcend the socially-constructed categories of race, class, and gender; however, she cautions that such action results in "category crisis" (Ginsberg 13) as this form of boundary crossing exposes the subjective nature of these culturally policed categories. Ginsberg writes:

> [. . .] it can be argued that gender, in the arbitrariness of its cultural prescriptions, is a trope of difference that shares with race (especially in the context of black/white passing) a similar structure of identity categories whose enactments and boundaries are culturally policed. [. . .] The very real possibility of gender passing [. . .] thus is likely to threaten

not only the security of male identity, as race passing threatens the security of white identity, but also, as does race passing, the certainties of identity categories and boundaries. (13)

As we will see in the next chapter, Ginsberg's concept of passing can also be applied to body size resulting in the exposure of the arbitrary binary thin/fat; unfortunately, Bigger Girl Lit texts fail to utilize the empowered position the fat narrators occupy as they still seek to define themselves by normalized notions of women, and as such they remain at the margin.

Conclusions

Chick Lit texts are published mainly for entertainment value, and Bigger Girl Lit texts are marketed so that larger-than-average readers are attracted to the plots because they might understand and identify with the frustration, pain, and suffering of the protagonists. In this sense, this branch of Chick Lit appears to be inclusive, acknowledging the "fat woman" within the overall targeted consumer group. Supposedly, in sharing this experience, readers are able to laugh along with the witty protagonist as she tries to make her way through life in a larger-than-normal body/costume. Bigger Girl Lit texts have emerged as the bigger girl's refuge from society's pressure to be thin by featuring protagonists who initially reject the socially and culturally-constructed ideals of beauty. However, upon careful analysis, it becomes clear that *Conversations with the Fat Girl*, *Alternate Beauty*, and *Good in Bed* continue to oppress and marginalize women by perpetuating the male-dominated discourse that defines their protagonists within the rigid category of Woman.

In the first chapter of my thesis I discuss Maggie's struggle for control of her body and how her quest for autonomy is complicated by her fat-girl identity and the controlling ideology

of the thin female body which is ever-present within her culture. I discuss how the fat female body complicates gender performance, and how body size is performative exposing the possibility of passing as thin/fat regardless of one's actual body size. I also explore the concept of fat as a subculture using Dick Hebdige's model of punk subculture. In the second chapter of my thesis, I draw on Hillel Schwart's model of a "Fat Utopia," and consider such a possibility. In this vein, I analyze Waggener's representation of insatiable appetites as reinforcing oppressive subject positioning. I also examine how her use of negative language reinforces negative stereotypes of the fat body, and I expose how her characterization of Ronnie as an out-of-control sex addict reinforces male-dominated discourse. In the final chapter of my thesis I examine how Cannie's fat-girl identity is constructed by the men in her life, and consequently how she gains the illusion of self-acceptance and control of her body through a benevolent male partner. Using the conception of self-help as outlined by Catherine Hopwood's "My Discourse/My-Self: Therapy as Possibility (For Women Who Eat Compulsively)," I discuss the control that diet culture and medical discourse have over women's bodies, and examine how pregnancy positively influences Cannie's self-perception.

Chapter One

Trapped in a Role: Patriarchal Discourse in *Conversations with the Fat Girl*

Liza Palmer's *Conversations with the Fat Girl* tells the fictional story of twenty-seven year old Maggie Thompson whose preoccupation with body size, in particular her own, negatively affects almost every aspect of her daily life. Maggie is typecast as a woman with low self-esteem and a lack of self-confidence, and because of these characteristics she is very skeptical and judgmental of the female bodies she encounters throughout the novel. Having grown up in Los Angeles where "if you're over a size 0 you're just shy of a circus sideshow" (Palmer 3), Maggie admits to having struggled with her weight her entire life. She is envious of women with smaller bodies, and therefore tends to dislike thin women. Upset about the size of her own "normal" (3) size body, she is equally disgusted by larger bodies, and is therefore unable to accept any body. Throughout Palmer's novel, body size serves to regulate power, and female bodies are divided into different categories, with some wielding more power than others, depending on their size. Challenging the binaries of thin/fat through her characterization of "fat" Maggie and her "thin" best friend Olivia, Palmer sheds light on the arbitrary nature of the thin/fat dichotomy, as Olivia successfully transforms her "massive" (304) body into a "perfect" size two (76), yet she continues to view herself as a fat woman. Similarly, Maggie believes, despite having admitted that her body size is "normal" (3), that she is fat and as such she considers herself to be abnormal compared to thin women who she perceives as normal. By this logic, thin Olivia should represent normalcy, yet her meticulous attention to her food intake and her bizarre relationship with her fiancé are two examples of how she remains abnormal thereby suggesting that fatness is not only physical but a state of mind. "Fat" girls, Maggie and Olivia, are initially brought together by their body sizes and the assumptions others make about them. Together,

Maggie understands their worth akin to Dick Hebdige's explanation of subculture, as Maggie seeks autonomy from the "natural" thin female body through her body performance. Palmer attempts to portray Maggie as a lonely, insecure, and undesirable overeater whose journey to self-acceptance ultimately ends in the realization that successful bodies come in all sizes. However, this result is contradictory to Palmer's message; by the conclusion of the novel, Maggie has begun fitness sessions with a male personal trainer and is excited and encouraged to continue her new lifestyle as she discovers her "unexpected" weight loss.

Maggie's belief that she is fat is based on social-construction which supposes that thin is synonymous with professional and sexual success, and because she does not consider herself successful by either of those definitions, she views herself as a failure and therefore abnormal. Her reasoning is mediated by her society's standards of beauty, which is ordered by the phallus. Patriarchal discourse is riddled with hierarchical binaries, including such binaries as subject versus object, self versus other, man versus woman. Each component is assigned value based on its relation to the phallus. For instance, in the relationship between subject/object, subjects act upon objects. Man, "who is assumed to represent humanity in general" (Abrams 88), is always the dominant subject who possesses the most power and control, and woman is "merely the negative object, or 'Other'" (88). Therefore, the binary of self and other also assumes that the self or subject is male, thereby casting the object as Other. De Beauvoir explains that these binaries are based on socially-constructed male/female sex roles, and by virtue of their male sex, men are expected to be strong and in control. Comparatively, women, by virtue of being deemed the opposite of men, are expected to be weak and emotionally out-of-control. Women, lacking the phallus, are always inferiorly positioned as man's other within male-dominated discourse, and as such, women are categorized as objects of men's desire who are nevertheless emotionally,

sexually, and physically in need of control. The socially-constructed binary of the (male/essential) One and the (female/inessential) Other as defined by de Beauvoir is evident in Bigger Girl Lit when reading the female body through a masculine lens as the (thin) One and the (fat) Other.

In *The Madwoman in the Attic,* feminist theorists Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar analyze the representation of women in Victorian fiction[13]. They note that the representations of the "good woman," or the virgin, depict obedient, submissive, domesticated, and virtuous women, whereas the "bad woman," or the whore, monster, or madwoman, is depicted as disobedient, outspoken, aggressive, and overtly sexual. Similar to the unjust categorization of woman as man's other, the virgin/whore dichotomy is a social-construct which "attempt[s] to enclose [woman] in definitions of her person and her potential which, by reducing her to extreme stereotypes (angel/monster) drastically conflict with her own sense of her self – that is, of her subjectivity, her autonomy, her creativity" (Gilbert and Gubar 2026). In a sexual economy, women as objects of male desire compete with each other for the attention of men, and they strive to be the ideal Other – an endeavour that the fat female body complicates as it does not fit in such rigid categorizations. Neither angels nor madwomen, the protagonists of Bigger Girl Lit are left outside such categories. The trouble is, they seek to fit precisely in to such oppressive roles.

Similar to stereotypical definitions of male/female sex and gender roles, the thin/fat dichotomy is also socially-constructed. Stereotypes of the thin body include good health, physical discipline, self-control and professional and sexual success, whereas the fat body

[13] I acknowledge that referencing Victorian critics introduces a different time period of literature which includes different body ideals; however, Gilbert and Gubar's text is still relevant in the study of 21st-century literature when considering the arbitrary categorization of women in the binary of thin/fat as it relates to the theoretical framework of the virgin/whore dichotomy.

represents poor health, a lack of discipline and self-control, and emotional, sexual, and professional failure. In a culture in which thin bodies are most often thought of as sexy and attractive, thin bodies are privileged and valued. As a self-perceived "fat" woman, Maggie is ashamed and embarrassed of her appearance as she believes fat bodies are unattractive and undesirable. This is reinforced while Maggie is dining with her best friend Olivia and Olivia's fiancé Adam, and a disgusted Adam focuses the group's attention on a large woman struggling to exit her booth. Maggie describes the scene as follows:

> A slight man is looking on as his wife slides out of their booth. Her stomach is sitting on top of and below the table for a sliding-glass-door effect. Her napkin is still perched on her large bosom, and she is nervously laughing for she has—horror of horrors—become stuck in the booth. She is trying to push the table forward, but it is bolted to the floor. As she pushes the booth behind her is being rocked back and forth. The young man in the booth gets out and asks if he can help her in any way. Acting oblivious, the woman's husband, now on his cell phone, moves out of the restaurant. The woman's laughs are becoming more and more hysterical as she sees her husband leaving. The young man waves down the waitress, who tells him if they just push the booth back, the woman will be freed. The woman yanks the napkin off her breasts and looks down on herself. I can't watch anymore. I know that look. I know that moment. She is promising herself she will never eat again, and this is the day she will begin her new exercise regimen. (58)

Besides her visible size, which is described as "large," the restaurant booth itself hints at the less visible societal expectations as the table cuts into her extended stomach signaling that her body is beyond a socially-acceptable size. A smaller, thinner person has no problem moving in and out of the booth, as evident by her "slight" husband's effortless actions. This woman sees herself

through the male gaze and "looks down on herself," disgusted and ashamed, and her own husband completely ignores her and actually leaves the restaurant, the ultimate cue that fat bodies are undesired bodies, and paradoxically invisible as he is "oblivious" to her struggle and embarrassment. On the one hand she is a spectacle – an object on display signifying disgust, failure, and shame as the narrator and friends watch. On the other hand, as a sexual object she is invisible as her husband exits the restaurant without her. This woman's fat body eliminates her from the category Woman, object of male desire, and instead she is a symbol of failure, and her positioning reinforces the fat phobia that Maggie and Olivia share. It is this embarrassment, coupled with male disapproval, that cause both Olivia and Maggie to change their bodies out of fear of being rejected and ignored; Maggie uses clothing to hide her body, whereas Olivia uses surgery to reshape hers.

While Maggie's actual weight is never revealed, her narration makes clear early in the novel that she perceives her body as "fat." This is not an accurate representation but rather a psychological one. The inability to view her body as any size other than "fat" demonstrates the control her society has over her self-perception. In *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,* French Marxist theorist Louis Althusser "analyzes how dominant social systems enforce their control—subtly molding human subjects through ideology – and how they reproduce themselves" (Leitch et al. 1476). Althusser argues that Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) are part of the private sphere of influence, and as such, they exert control over subjects through the function of ideology, which is understood as representative of "the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence" (Althusser 1498). Althusser lists a variety of mediums through which ideology functions, citing, for example religion, education, family, law, and politics as strong forces of influence in our society. In *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal*

Feminism, feminist theorist Elizabeth Grosz explores the hierarchal relationships between mind and body, the mental and the physical, and culture and nature, all of which oppress the body. Grosz explains how body image operates as representative of the self: "The body image is a map or representation of the degree of narcissistic investment of the subject in its own body and body parts [. . .] measuring not only the physical but also the physiological changes the body undergoes in its day-to-day actions and performances" (83). As bodies are subject to historical and cultural influences, Grosz explains that "body image is as much a function of the subject's psychology and sociohistorical context as of anatomy" (79). The description that is provided of Maggie's appearance details that she is "pushing six feet" (Palmer 37) with a solid build and while her family and friends do not perceive her as fat, she continuously blames her "Area," a term she uses to refer to her "ever-burgeoning belly," for her unhappiness (8). While her body is not "fat" compared to other bodies she encounters, namely her best friend's Olivia pre-surgery, Maggie is convinced her single status and lousy job are a direct result of her "Area," which is "not good enough" (39). Maggie explains how her negative self-image is something she has learned while growing up in Los Angeles. She narrates: "If you've ever been told you're beautiful or 'should go into acting.' You end up here. This means the top 1 percent of the beautiful people in the nation are just walking around the city, willy-nilly. Then there are people like me, who anywhere else would be categorized as 'normal.' But in LA, if you're over a size 0 you're just shy of a circus sideshow" (3). Despite admitting that she has a "normal" size body, Maggie can only identify her body by L.A.'s standards of beauty, and as such she views herself as abnormal because her body is not a size zero, thereby allowing her society to inform and control her self-perception.

Accepting the repressive notion that women are supposed to be thin if they aspire to be successful and happy, Maggie's day-to-day life is compromised because she is "fat." This negative self-perception results in her belief that others will not accept her because of her size: "I convinced myself I was on the outside because I was a little chunkier than most. I never once took into consideration that they just might not like me" (14). Accepting the notion that fat bodies are undesirable, and convinced that she herself is "fat," Maggie alters her lifestyle to compensate for her body and she essentially makes herself invisible because she does not believe her body is worth being seen. Maggie narrates:

> I *never* call attention to myself. That is the code I live by. I don't go into movie theaters late. I don't buy tank tops. I don't sing along with the car radio. I try never to walk in front of anyone. I constantly pull at my clothes. I walk with my eyes to the ground. I constantly apologize for myself. I don't like hugs. I don't look in mirrors. I don't smile in pictures because of a possible double-chin incident. It boils down to this: If I am invisible, no one can make fun of me. (17-18, author's emphasis)

The desire to hide her body is crucial to Maggie's characterization as a "fat" female protagonist and her narration demonstrates the embarrassment and shame she feels as a result of her "fat" body. In her opinion, her "fat" body should not wear skin-baring, feminine tank tops; it should always exist in the background of social situations, and as such, should never be in the center of attention. She walks with her eyes downcast, and avoids looking in the mirror at her self-defined grotesque body. As a self-proclaimed "fat" woman, Maggie's size is performed through her clothing as well as her physical demeanour as she averts her eyes and her smile and acts as the stereotypical fat girl in the background. It is ironic that Maggie, who is not actually fat, behaves this way, especially considering that she has witnessed first-hand the marginalization her best

friend suffered as a result of her obese body. In characterizing Maggie as a "normal" size woman who believes she is "fat," Palmer alludes to the control that prevailing images of the "ideal" female body have over young women in contemporary American culture as Maggie's fat mind-set causes her to deny herself a "normal" life because she is convinced she is "fat." Maggie attempts to assert control of her body through her gender performance by choosing clothing that she believes will direct attention away from herself, and in doing so she avoids being made invisible by other characters, mainly members of the opposite sex. By continuing to subscribe to the trappings of her sex Maggie ultimately fails to gain control of her body, despite her efforts to subvert the control using her clothing.

As a "fat" woman, Maggie in uncomfortable in feminine clothing but comfortable in men's clothes. Maggie narrates how much she dreads changing from her comfortable clothing to go for ice cream with her sister Kate and Kate's daughters, even though she loves spending time with her nieces (38). Initially, Maggie hesitates when Kate calls to invite her, and this causes tension between the two women as Maggie believes Kate will misinterpret her hesitation for not wanting to take the girls when in actuality it is her pre-occupation with her body size that causes her to hesitate. She states:

> It's never about watching my nieces or, as I call them, the girlies. I just can't imagine making myself presentable right now. I promised myself I would not get out of my favorite outfit all day. If I could just walk around in this gray men's tank top and these black terry-cloth pants, I would be the luckiest woman alive. I have been planning around this outfit for days now. With this phone call, I will have to put on a bra and panties. (36)

In private, men's clothing is, for Maggie, attractive, and as a rule she would much rather hide in her apartment wearing baggy men's clothing than put on feminine underwear. By wearing men's clothing, Maggie subverts conventional perceptions of gender, thereby challenging the "constitutive categories that seek to keep gender in its place by posturing as the foundational illusions of identity" (Butler 46). This drag-like performance demonstrates the body's ability to transcend rigid sex/gender roles; however, it is not without consequence as Maggie later remarks: "Sitting in front of Kate's house, all washed and wearing pants with a button, I curse my sister" (Palmer 36). When Maggie is in public she wears feminine clothing and she is miserable, yet she desires to present herself in the most attractive way possible because she desires to be successful. Her body has the ability to transcend sex/gender roles, but Maggie will not wear men's clothing in public because if she transcends gender norms then she will not be viewed as a successful woman. Her "fat" body is thus controlled as "normal" women wear feminine clothing which constrict and alter the shape of their bodies, as aforementioned in the Introduction when Maggie tries on her "spandex casing" tightener (109). Maggie's belief that she is fat and therefore undesirable and unsuccessful is further perpetuated when she visits with her sister Kate whom she perceives as a "normal" and successful woman.

Maggie desires to have a "normal" life, which she believes, for a woman her age, consists of marriage and motherhood (151). The description Maggie provides of Kate depicts the obvious physical differences between the two sisters, but also demonstrates how Maggie believes that thinness and success are intimately connected as she describes Kate as "perfect" and "at the top" of her classes:

Kate and I look exactly opposite from each other. Where I am pushing six feet, she is

> barely five feet tall. Where I have dark brown hair and brown eyes, Kate has white-blond hair and ice-blue eyes. I tend to have issues about my weight, yet Kate stays at a perfect size 2 no matter what the world throws at her. Pregnancy? She takes yoga and prenatal classes. Second pregnancy? Now she's teaching the yoga class and is at the top of the phone tree in her prenatal class. (37)

When describing Kate as a wife and mother of two, Maggie is envious of her sister's appearance and success. Kate is portrayed as a good woman: she is a wife and mother, petite, an attractive blonde with blue eyes, and she is social, intelligent, and athletic. Maggie, by comparison, sees herself as Kate's opposite with dark hair and eyes, tall, single, and "fat." Maggie's relationship with her sister demonstrates the influence that her family has over her body as Maggie's self-perception of her "fat" body causes her to believe she is a failure socially, intellectually, and athletically as compared to Kate's thin body, and as such Maggie views herself as subordinate within the family hierarchy. Kate represents normalcy in Maggie's eyes because of her ability to successfully perform her gender, and their opposite physical appearances reaffirm Maggie's belief that she is abnormal because of her inability to perform femininity as successfully. It is obvious that Maggie views thin bodies as successful bodies, as evident by her relationship with her sister, and until Maggie realizes that Olivia is not content in her thin body, she is not able to accept that thin does not necessarily mean better or happy.

Having grown up in a culture where thin bodies are considered to be more attractive bodies, Maggie has learned to hate her "normal" size (3). Gilbert and Gubar argue: "[l]earning to become a beautiful object, the girl learns anxiety about—perhaps even loathing of—her own flesh. Peering obsessively into the real as well as metaphoric looking glasses that surround her, she desires literally to 'reduce' her own body" (54). Le'a Kent confirms this notion in her essay

"Fighting Abjection," when she writes that "in mainstream conceptions of the self and the body, [. . .] the self, the person who one *is*, is presumptively thin" (Kent 132, author's emphasis). Self-portrayed as a "fat" woman, Maggie loves to eat; however, the longing for a smaller body has her perpetually dieting. Maggie states: "I've been on so many diets, I've forgotten what eating without a calculator and judge and jury in my head feels like. Whether for comfort or out of boredom, I reach for food rather than a brisk walk or a long hot bath. When I am not overeating, I ruthlessly deprive myself of food. I've never looked at food as nourishment or fuel. Instead, I look at is as a savior or a taboo" (Palmer 110). The need to have a thin body is engrained in Maggie's mind so much so that she admits she does not know how to eat without the help of a calculator or worrying about the consequences of each bite she takes. As a "fat" woman, Maggie is characterized as almost anorexic or bulimic, and Palmer perpetuates the stereotype that fat bodies are out-of-control, lazy, and unintelligent, as evidenced by Maggie's need to follow dieting instructions from a calculator, thereby removing the locus of control from the individual to scientific and mathematical discourses. In order to avoid being viewed as "fat," Maggie alters her behaviour when she is in public, a trait shared among Bigger Girl Lit protagonists (as we will see in the next chapter). Maggie's perception of her own body is dependent on how she believes others view her; if she is in public she is more likely to hide her food cravings or intake to limit drawing attention to her "fat" body. For example, while buying snacks at a health food store, Maggie buys a few non-healthy items and asks the cashier to bag them separately for "her roommate" out of fear of being identified as the unhealthy, fat pig, binging on fattening food. Similarly, while she and her love interest, Domenic, are moving her things to her new apartment, Maggie picks up a "pink pastry box o'magic," and two additional treats that she eats in secret: "Then I pick up a dozen doughnuts. I laughingly tell myself the doughnuts are for Domenic and

my 'moving team,' even though my 'moving team' (read: *my family*) isn't meeting me until lunchtime at the new house, thereby negating the need for doughnuts. I ask for a maple bar and a twist on the side. That way I can eat the two extras on the way home and it will look like I haven't opened the pink pastry box o'magic" (130). Maggie's fear of being identified as a fat woman causes her to disguise her eating habits so that she can avoid the negative stereotypes associated with fat bodies, alluding to an attempt to control how her body is viewed. Not only is she concerned with how others view her, but also with how others view her successful performance.

The construction of Maggie's insecurities are reinforced through Palmer's characterization of Olivia as a woman whose "massive" body is unable to escape being viewed as unattractive (304). While self-conscious Maggie hides her body under layers of clothing in an attempt to appear "invisible," she notes that Olivia cannot hide. Maggie narrates: "Olivia didn't have the ability to become invisible. Her sheer size made her the epitome of visible. But it was visibility at a distance. You couldn't avoid looking at her and how big she had gotten. But you also couldn't touch her or get close to her because of how big she'd gotten" (18). Prior to having the gastric bypass surgery that shrinks Olivia to a size two, she "dresses in the height of plus-size fashion" but is never able to escape the negative connotations of her fat body as some young men refer to her as a whale because of her body size (17). Hence, even when she wears feminine clothing, Olivia's fat body still evades an attractive, feminine appearance because she is dehumanized. While Maggie's fat mind-set creates a distance between herself and Kate, she and Olivia are brought together as they bond over their "shared" fat experiences despite the fact that they have very different bodies (18). Elaine K. Ginsberg's discourse of "passing identities" can be applied to Palmer's characterization of both Maggie and Olivia (post-surgery) as these

characters essentially "trespass" as fat and thin respectively. While Olivia's decision to have gastric bypass surgery grants her the body she has always dreamed of, it does not alter her self-perception and as a result, she fails to recognize her thin body. Her ability to transform her body (and life) sheds light on the arbitrary categorization of thin/fat, as Olivia is almost successful at completely reinventing herself. Comparatively, Maggie's ability to convince herself that she is fat causes her to live the only life she can imagine her "fat" body deserves, regardless of the fact that she is not actually fat. Both passings allude to the ways in which bodies, in size and shape, are performatives.

In her text, Ginsberg examines the relationship between culture and identity, and more specifically what occurs when an individual challenges his or her socially-constructed identity. She uses the examples of a white-skinned, African slave and a transgendered woman to illustrate that identities, in these examples racial and gender based, are dual aspects which are "bound by social and legal constraints related to the physical body" (2). Ginsberg writes that society "insists on the relationship between an individual's gender [and racial] identity and his or her physical being, and when that relationship is subverted, the cultural logic of gender categories—and privileges—is threatened" (2). Both the white-skinned African slave and the transgendered woman successfully pass "from a category of subordination and oppression to one of freedom and privilege" (2), as the African man's white skin colour saves him from enslavement and the woman's ability to cross-dress permits her escape from her oppressive female sex role. However, neither passing is without consequence. Ginsberg writes: "passing is about identities: their creation or imposition, their adoption or rejection, their accompanying rewards or penalties" (2). The transgendered woman is murdered for her trespassing, and should the African slave

have been caught, he too would suffer consequences at the hand of his master for his "deception."

Within hegemonic ideology an individual's identity is assumed to be natural and it is based on a socially-constructed binary system of male/female and white/non-white. Ginsberg writes: "Passing is also about the boundaries established between identity categories and about the individual and cultural anxieties induced by boundary crossing" (2). Individuals are expected to behave and appear according to their prescribed identity categories regardless of her or his desire or will, and to exist outside of this boundary is to go against social and cultural order. Consequences are controlled and distributed by the individuals who are in power. Ginsberg writes: "Accompanying any such privilege, like the right to join an exclusive club, is the right to determine who else shall be permitted to join or, to put it another way, the right to exclude, the right to define who would be deemed 'not white'" (7). Both of Ginsberg's examples demonstrate how identity is not essential, and how social order is disturbed when individuals escape their hegemonic, oppressive categorizations. Ginsberg explains that "allowing the possibility that 'maleness' or 'whiteness' or ethnicity can be performed or enacted, donned or discarded, exposes the anxieties about status and hierarchy created by the potential of boundary trespassing" (4). She writes: "the process and the discourse of passing challenge the essentialism that is often the foundation of identity politics, a challenge that may be seen as either threatening or liberating but in either instance discloses the truth that identities are not singularly true or false but multiple and contingent" (4). The idea that one's identity is neither fixed nor essential suggests that there does not have to be a link between identity and physical being and that identities are formed based on both that which is visible as well as that which is invisible.

The act of passing "is usually motivated by a desire to shed the identity of an oppressed group to gain access to social and economic opportunities" of another (3). One's physical appearance causes identity passing to be challenging, but what is unseen or invisible also complicates the ability to pass from one identity to another. Ginsberg writes: "it is assumed that the distinctions between 'man' and 'woman' are not only visible and readily discernible but also inextricably related to the binary set male/female" and therefore not based solely on what is visible, but also what is understood and "culturally policed" (13)[14]. Ginsberg's examples of racial and gender passing demonstrate how the act of passing disrupts identity categories, and as such there are detrimental consequences as, for example, in the case of the transgendered woman: death. Her examples also point to the arbitrary categorization of the binary system. Ginsberg writes: "just as the ontology of race exposes the contingencies of the categories 'white' and 'black,' so the ontology of gender exposes the essential inauthenticity of 'man' and 'woman'" (13). Citing Butler, Ginsberg explains that gender, like race, is defined "within the terms of a hegemonic cultural discourse" (in Ginsberg 13), and any deviation from the socially-accepted norm "creates category crisis" (13). Ginsberg writes: "The very real possibility of gender passing—cross-dressing—thus is likely to threaten not only the security of male identity, as race passing threatens the security of white identity, but also, as does race passing, the certainties of identity categories and boundaries" (13). If race and gender are performed, rather than fixed entities, the entire binary system of order is faulty, and passing is one way "to transcend the limitations of a racist, classist, and sexist society" (11).

Ginsberg outlines various categories of identity, including race, ethnicity, class, sex, and gender. As her discussion demonstrates, the categories of race and gender point to the arbitrary

[14] Ginsberg's description of cultural policing is relevant when considering how body size is culturally monitored; however, for this particular reading of the female body I am using Ginsberg's text to demonstrate the way body size can be transcended.

nature of the binary system, and these categories can be extended to include discourse of the body. Just as gender is socially-constructed and linked to the physical male or female body, perceptions of body size are also socially-constructed and linked to biological features that differentiate between thin/fat. Consequently, body size can also be read as performative. Similar to the transgendered woman's "murder [as] a tragic consequence of a female's transgression and usurpation of male gender and sexual roles" (2), the unveiling of Olivia's previously fat body at her wedding reception can be read as the consequence of a fat body's transgression of the thin female body's gender and sex roles as the revealing of Olivia's once "massive" body ostracizes her from the new life she creates for herself as a thin woman.

Olivia's motivation to undergo gastric bypass surgery can be understood in terms of her desire to pass; she will "assume a new [thin] identity, escaping the subordination and oppression accompanying [her fat] identity and accessing the privileges and status of the other" (Ginsberg 3). As a fat woman, Olivia attempts to attract positive male attention by dressing in attractive, plus-size clothing, but she is unsuccessful because her fat body is not viewed as an attractive or sexy body as demonstrated when she and Maggie are standing on the Golden Gate bridge and a car full of young men yell "Thar She Blows" out the window of their car as they pass the two women (Palmer 17). Maggie observes: "[Olivia's] skin had cleared up nicely, and she was dressed in the height of plus-size fashion. But at that angle, on that night, on that bridge, she was just another fat girl" (17). Regardless of her otherwise seemingly attractive appearance, Olivia's fat body continues to be the focus of any attention she receives, and as such her gender performance fails as she remains in the category of unattractive and undesirable non-woman. Ginsberg writes: "although cultural logic of passing suggests that passing is usually motivated by a desire to shed the identity of an oppressed group to gain access to social and economic

opportunities, the rationale for passing may be more or less complex or ambiguous and motivated by other kinds of perceived rewards" (3). In the case of Maggie and Olivia, both women believe that smaller bodies will result in marriage and happiness. Olivia's inability to escape her subordinate position as a fat woman who is sexually unattractive motivates her to drastically change the size and shape of her body with gastric by-pass surgery, followed by "two more plastic surgeries to 'correct' certain problems and side effects of the [gastric by-pass] surgery" (Palmer 18). Ginsberg explains that in order to successfully disguise a "presumed 'natural' or 'essential' identity" (3) one must "leave an environment where his or her 'true identity' [. . .] [is] known to find a place where it [is] unknown" (3). For Olivia this means moving away from her hometown, family, and friends and reinventing a thin and "better" life for herself which includes a fiancé who is a handsome doctor and a group of "painfully thin" girlfriends (Palmer 261). Wanting to have nothing to do with her fat past, Olivia makes her mother "get rid of all the pictures of when she was fat before Adam [her fiancé] came for his first visit" (72), and Olivia even puts distance between herself and Maggie as she does her best to erase her fat life. While surgery does permit Olivia to escape the oppressive shell of her fat female body, it does not grant her happiness as it does not alter her fat mind-set and she has difficulty accepting her thin body. This is most evident the evening Maggie meets Olivia's "gorgeous" fiancé (72) for the first time, and Olivia frantically remarks: "'I can't believe a guy who looks like that is...you know... willing to be seen with me.' Go out with *me?* Olivia was talking so fast. Where was all this coming from?"(73). Previously described as beautiful and perfect, Olivia is unable to enjoy her new life because she still thinks of herself as fat. Even after the multiple surgeries Olivia has to transform her body into a feminine body, she still believes she is unattractive, and she cannot understand why a handsome doctor would be interested in her.

Just as society demands a relationship between one's gender and one's physical being, it is also expected that one's physical body size will match her or his own self-perception, and Palmer's characterization of Olivia as an insecure thin woman points to the fact that while surgery alters the physical appearance of Olivia's body (from fat to thin), it does not alter her fat-girl identity. Despite Olivia's inability to see her new body (not unlike Maggie's inability to see her own), her surgery grants her the ability to successfully pass as a beautiful, successful woman.

The day of Olivia's final wedding dress fitting showcases her thin performance as she emerges from the dressing room after being "pinned and sewn" into her size two dress (75). She is described as "a fairy princess," "stunning," "magnetic," and "the envy of everyone around her" (76). As she "twirl[s]" atop the bridal platform (76), it is obvious that her experience of trying on her wedding gown is much more pleasurable and successful than that of "the woman of size" trying dresses on four platforms away (77). In comparison, the overweight bride "stands on the viewing platform and is silent" (78) while her family and friends "fret" about the trouble they are having trying to locate a dress that will fit her larger body. The plus-size bride's silence signals her powerlessness, as she is a bystander at her own bridal fitting, while Olivia actively "becomes the barking orders, condescending Olivia, shooing people away with a royal flick of her hand" at her own platform (76). When Olivia emerges from the dressing room a crowd forms around her, "ogling" the thin bride in all her beauty (78). Despite her obvious slender appearance, Olivia asks Maggie "at which angle it look[s] the most like a size 2" (76), revealing her inability to see her new body. Conversely, when the fat bride emerges from the dressing room, she is met with panic and chaos: "Bridal shop workers run to find bigger sizes [. . .] there is no celebration, no thumbs-up. Just someone to quickly throw a shawl over her shoulders, an accessory they feel is a must. Sometimes she emerges with her girdle fully visible in the back

because some dresses can't be buttoned at all" (78). Everyone around her is trying to make her look as attractive as possible by covering her body because a fat bride is an unattractive bride. Unlike Olivia, her body must be hidden and covered by "shawls" and "accessories;" different props are used in the hopes of achieving an attractive and feminine performance, and anxiety ensues when her body cannot be confined by the bridal dress; her body is literally out of bounds.

Since Maggie and Olivia believe that smaller bodies will result in marriage, happiness, and the "normal" lives they lack as fat women, Olivia's surgery should result in her transference from the fat/abnormal category to the thin/normal category; however, her result is opposite as evident by her secretive past, freakishly-controlled eating (55), sexless relationship with her fiancé who refuses to share a bed with her (34), and her inability to recognize her own beauty. Because of the relationship that the two women share, Maggie is privy to both fat and thin Olivia, and as a result Maggie regards herself as superior to Olivia whose thin body is achieved by the hand of a surgeon rather than of her own accord with physical exercise and eating healthily as Maggie does. The text's message is that thinness can be achieved "naturally" (non-surgically), as fatness is a state of mind, and a result of improper control over one's appetite, exercise, and attitude. However, Maggie still continues to lack control over her own body even as she gains self-control because she learns how to care for herself by writing a food journal and following instructions from her personal trainer, Gabriel (197). In her article entitled "Authenticity, Convention, and Bridget Jones's Diary," Alison Case explores the relationship between narrative technique, authenticity, and "feminine narration"[15] in Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary*. Case argues that the opening lines of Bridget's diary entries feature meticulous documentation of her food, alcohol, and cigarette intake, and the act of recording these

[15] This term is a literary convention she terms in her text *Plotting Women: Gender and Narration in the Eighteenth- and- Nineteenth Century British Novel* that is "characterized by the exclusion of the narrator from the activity of shaping her experience into a coherent and meaningful story" (Case 176).

behaviours reflects Bridget's desire to control her life, as Maggie asserts control at the end of *Conversations with the Fat Girl.* Case writes: "[t]he fact that Bridget keeps a diary, and keeps it the way she does, is an important aspect of her character—an indicator of her desire to take control of her life, get some perspective on her more obsessive behaviors, and confide in someone or something" (Case 178). In both *Bridget Jones's Diary* and *Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason*, Bridget also relies on self-help books as a means of gaining control of her life.

Bridget is not alone in feeling that her life is out-of-control as this "desire to take control of her life" is a phenomenon she shares with many of her Chick Lit sisters (178). For example, in Sophie Kinsella's *Confessions of a Shopaholic,* readers witness the protagonist, Rebecca Bloomwood, as she embarks on numerous shopping binges and, as a result of her out-of-control spending habits, she is often staggered and bewildered by her outrageously expensive credit card statements. Similarly, Bridget believes that in order to achieve everlasting love with a man she must be feminine, not smoke or drink to excess, and possess "inner poise," and until then she will remain a singleton (Fielding 99). This idea of a certain type of woman is imposed on Bridget by her society, which privileges women who appear to be in control of their sexual, emotional, and physical lives. Bridget feels inadequate because she fails to follow the self-help manuals and therefore cannot uphold the standards of her society. She believes she will not be successful until she has a man who loves her, and she believes the only way a man will love her is by controlling herself, allowing the ideological state apparatus to exert control over her life. Similarly, Maggie's food journals appear to represent her taking charge of her body; however, the act of remitting these journals to Gabriel exposes the illusion of self-control as it is he who has control over her body, not unlike the power and control Olivia's plastic surgeon has over her body.

Maggie's skewed perspective fuels the ultimate demise of their friendship as she eventually has enough of Olivia's deception, and as a result she exposes Olivia's secret during the rehearsal party. At the conclusion of the novel, Maggie "outs" Olivia's past by putting together a slideshow of pictures showcasing Olivia's fat body which all the rehearsal guests watch. Maggie narrates: "Olivia turns to Adam. He is holding her hip in a kind of distancing way. It's as if he wants to show everyone that his soon-to-be-wife's flaws don't freak him out. But at the same time, he's clearly not allowing her to come any closer to him. With this rejection, Olivia turns to her mother. The song is still playing in the background as the laptop whirs on" (Palmer 306). By exposing Olivia's past, Maggie inverts the power dynamic she perceives Olivia is awarded because of her thin body. As she forces Olivia to acknowledge her fat past, Maggie takes control and asserts her power over Olivia. As Maggie exits the reception hall she is already feeling better about her own appearance. She narrates: "I am walking easily under the vaulted ceiling with the Italian frescoes. I look down and realize I'm wearing heels and I'm not tripping or walking like a truck driver" (309). Unfortunately Maggie undermines her own emergence when she exposes the "true" Olivia, because it is evident that Maggie maintains the view that fat is bad.

How fat bodies are viewed in the novel is comparable to Hebdige's explanation of subculture as defined in his text *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. According to him, a subculture is comprised of a group of people who exist on the margin of a larger cultural community because they do not share the same beliefs as the mass majority. They exist at the margin at times by choice, but most often they are "dismissed, denounced and canonized; treated at different times as threats to public order" (2). Referencing the work of French author Jean Genet, who elaborated on his experiences in prison in his text *The Thief's Journal*, Hebdige

explores "the subversive implications of style [. . .] in the expressive forms and rituals of those subordinate groups" (2). Hebdige argues that, at times, ordinary objects take on double meanings depending on use and context and that "the tensions between dominant and subordinate groups can be found reflected in the surfaces of subculture – in the styles made up of mundane objects which have a double meaning" (2). Hebdige provides the example of the post-Second World War punk subculture and their use of safety pins as representative of Great Britain's degeneration and joblessness, resulting in a rhetorical language that is visible and tangible. He writes: "the punks were not only directly *responding* to increasing joblessness, changing moral standards, the rediscovery of poverty, the Depression, etc., they were *dramatizing* what had come to be called 'Britain's decline' by constructing a language which was, [. . .] unmistakably relevant and down to earth" (87). Hebdige's example of punk subculture and the symbolic challenge of "the 'inevitability,' the 'naturalness' of class and gender stereotypes" (89) is comparable to fat bodies which are rejected and dismissed by contemporary Western culture as evident in *Conversations with the Fat Girl*. A closer examination of Hebdige's definition of subculture will shed light on the ways in which fat bodies are forced to the margins of society.

Hebdige begins his discussion of subcultures by defining what comprises a culture, writing that it is an "ambiguous concept," where meanings and rules change depending on who is in power at any given time. Citing Roland Barthes, Hebdige explains that "everything in everyday life is dependent on the representation which the bourgeoisie *has and makes us have* of the relations between men and the world" (qtd. In Hebdige 9, Barthes' emphasis). According to Barthes, there is a "hidden set of rules, codes and conventions through which meanings particular to specific social groups (i.e. those in power) are rendered universal and 'given' for the whole of

society" (qtd. in Hebdige 9). The style of subcultures form when that which is considered "natural" or "given" is rejected, and forced to take on new meaning and value. Hebdige writes: "the process whereby objects are made to mean and mean again as 'style' in subculture [. . .] begins with a crime against the natural order [. . .] But it ends in the construction of a style, in a gesture of defiance or contempt, in a smile or a sneer. It signals a Refusal" (3). This refusal is necessary, Hebdige explains, not only because it signals "the presence of difference," but also because mundane objects can also signify "forbidden identity, [and] sources of value" for those who consider them as icons (3).

For Hebdige, "the tensions [that exist] between dominant and subordinate groups can be found reflected in the surfaces of subculture—in the styles made up of mundane objects which have a double meaning" (2). Hebdige uses the example of the punk culture movement and their use of safety pins as a symbol of rebellion and "Refusal" from the natural order of the ruling class. For punks, the safety pin is an example of a mundane object that has been "magically appropriated; 'stolen' by subordinate groups and made to carry 'secret' meanings: meanings which express, in code, a form of resistance to the order which guarantees their continued subordination" (18). Hebdige argues that it is through style that subcultures challenge the hegemony of the majority: "Style in subculture is, then, pregnant with significance. Its transformations go 'against nature', interrupting the process of 'normalization.' As such, they are gestures, movements towards a speech which offends the 'silent majority', which challenges the principle of unity and cohesion, which contradicts the myth of consensus," and he challenges critics "to discern the hidden messages inscribed in code on the glossy surfaces of style, to trace them out as 'maps of meaning' which obscurely re-present the very contractions they are designed to resolve or conceal" (18).

Hebdige's discussion of the punk subculture can be compared to how fatness can be regarded as a subculture within *Conversations with the Fat Girl.* As we have already established, fat bodies exist at the margin of society because their size does not (and cannot) conform to prevailing images of feminine beauty. As aforementioned, Olivia's fat body is compared to a whale, the fat woman in the restaurant signifies rejection and disgust, and Olivia's new friends laugh at the revealing of her fat body and her soon-to-be husband holds her at a distance. In this transgressive movement, Olivia represents what Hebdige refers to as a "threat to public order" (Hebdige 2). Fat female bodies represent a deviation from the ideal thin body, which Western/American society has come to expect as representative of what it means to be a (universal/essentialist) Woman. In this sense it is possible to regard fat as a subculture. As young women, Maggie and Olivia bond over their "shared" repression, a bond which is broken when Olivia no longer appears fat and ultimately denies her fat past, leaving Maggie to fend for herself. Following Hebdige, Maggie's defense, her "mundane object" (Hebdige 2), "forbidden identity," (3) and source of power is her decision to wear men's clothing. By choosing to wear loose and baggy clothing Maggie rejects the "natural" feminine appearance, an act that is powerful for her as making herself invisible is within her own control: if she does not want to be viewed as a sexual object, this drag-like performance removes her from the male gaze within the heterosexual economy of viewing. This form of rejection is confirmed in Susie Orbach's text *Fat is a Feminist Issue,* wherein she writes: "fat expresses a rebellion against the powerlessness of the woman, against the pressure to look and act in a certain way and against being evaluated on her ability to create an image of herself" (9). Where this act fails, and consequently where the concept of a fat subculture within *Conversations with the Fat Girl* also fails, is the fact that from the beginning of the novel Maggie desires (and ultimately achieves) a successful gender

performance because she desires to participate within the heterosexual matrix. For Maggie, her "forbidden identity" is as powerful as it is destructive. Returning again to Kent's work, and her writing on "the self [who] is presumptively thin" (Kent 132), "there is no such thing as a fat *person*" (135, author's emphasis). Examining advertisements for exercise and weight loss products, and before and after photos of dieter success stories, she elicits the misconception that all fat people desire to be thin, and that fat is "something encasing a person, something from which a person must escape, something that a person must cast off" (134). Therefore, the fat body, the "abject object," remains at "the margins of the good self, haunting them as it helps create them. The fat body must be repeatedly evoked at the margins, drawn in and then expelled in order to continue taking the weight of corporeality off thin bodies" (136). Fat bodies signify attributes that are undesirable, for example, poor health, unattractiveness, and even death; furthermore, fat bodies allow thin bodies to continue to signify the ideal because all the undesirable aspects manifest themselves "solely" within the fat body, when in reality, they can be present in every body regardless of size. This is why, Kent argues, it is impossible to love a fat body because no one should aspire to be unhealthy. Maggie rejects her positioning as a "fat" woman in favour of a thin body which is why she enlists Gabriel's assistance, and also why she wears tighteners and women's clothing in public. Having watched fat Olivia's failed thin performance, Maggie must alter her body the "healthy" way, lest she remain unattractive and single forever.

Within *Conversations with the Fat Girl*, Palmer uses various body sizes to demonstrate the distinct boundaries that exist between fat and thin bodies, as seen through the eyes of the narrator. Convinced her "fat" body is undesirable and unattractive, Maggie lives on the margin of her social circle for fear of being rejected by those around her. It is not until she realizes that

successful bodies come in all sizes that she is able to assert herself and take control of her life. Palmer's characterization of Maggie as an insecure "fat"-girl-turned-confident-young-woman is undermined by her weight loss, as during Maggie's moment of triumph at Olivia's rehearsal dinner she cannot help but feel better about herself because she is lighter on her feet after having exposed Olivia as the true, "fat" woman/girl she used to be. Moreover, Maggie's success is undermined by her achieving her ideal self (or being on the path of self-acceptance) as a result of giving control of her body (and mind) to a man (Gabriel) whose job is to "train" her (literally) to be a successful woman. Her success is also marked by her union with her love-interest Domenic, who affirms her worth as a sexual object of male desire.

Chapter Two

It is all in the I: Conceptions of Beauty in *Alternate Beauty*

In the previous chapter, I examined the ways in which fat identity operates as a subculture, as well as how fat bodies, like gender, perform. In a culture where thin is privileged, Olivia has the ability to alter her fat body and effectively "pass" as thin until she is unmasked by Maggie who opts for a more "natural" alternative to surgery. Conversely, in her novel *Alternate Beauty,* Andrea Rains Waggener attempts to challenge opinions of body size by writing a story in which normative perceptions of beauty are reversed. In such an alternate reality, fat bodies, rather than thin bodies, are considered beautiful. However, in her attempt to portray fat bodies as beautiful bodies, Waggener undermines her argument by using negative and oppressive language to depict beauty. Ronnie, the novel's protagonist, awakens one morning in the alternate reality to realize that she is beautiful enough to model, and as such she launches into the life she believes she has been missing all along. Distracted by all the attention and success she receives as a desirable woman, her need to fill the emptiness she feels inside with food is replaced with a voracious appetite for sex and excitement, which, ironically, shrinks her body to a size ten by the conclusion of the novel – an undesirable size in the standards of the alternate reality but a more acceptable standard in the "real" world. Characterizing Ronnie as a voracious or insatiable woman whose appetite for food and/or sex is interchangeable reinforces the notion that both are elements of the same "dark" region of women's (un)controllable appetites. Waggener portrays Ronnie as a miserable fat girl who is incapable of achieving her dreams because she lacks self-confidence, and her journey to self-acceptance ultimately ends in the realization that beauty is all in the eye of the beholder; however, this result is contradictory to Waggener's message as, by the conclusion of the novel, Ronnie is returned to her original reality with her preferred smaller

body, thereby reinforcing a body discourse that deems thinner bodies more desirable and "better" bodies in the physical hierarchy. While Waggener's inversion does allow the fat female body to escape the subordinate positions of invisible and undesirable, the text does not escape the rigid sex/gender debate as women, both fat and thin, continue to seek the approval of men as objects of their sexual desire.

In the beginning of the novel, the protagonist, Ronnie Tremayne, is characterized as a fat woman. Compared to Maggie in *Conversations with the Fat Girl* and Cannie in *Good in Bed*, who are both categorized as "normal" or slightly above "average" weight, Ronnie is a size twenty-eight and weighs "nearly three hundred pounds" (Waggener 11). At the onset of the novel Ronnie claims that she does not mind her larger body size; rather, it is other characters who take issue with her fat body, and as a result Ronnie learns to hate her body. Again, we see the familial politics represented here that pit women, be it sisters or mothers and daughters, to compete with one another. For example, Ronnie's thin mother, Audrey, dislikes Ronnie's body. Ronnie states: "Aesthetics were important to Audrey. Which is why my fat offended her so much" (6). Prior to awakening in the alternate universe Ronnie perceives her mother's appearance as opposite to her own: "I flicked my gaze over Audrey. Beyond slender, bordering on bony, she looked like she'd been cut out with sharp scissors. By contrast, I looked like I'd been sketched in with pastel chalk, all soft edges and smudgy" (5). Audrey's body represents flawlessness with her "sharp" boundaries versus Ronnie's overflowing "soft" and "smudgy" edges. Audrey's body is also described as "slender" and "bony" alluding to an ultra feminine appearance which borders on being too thin and androgynous. Ronnie's description of Audrey focuses specifically on her facial features, which continue to reinforce Audrey's symmetrical appearance: "Her face was a collection of angles—flat forehead, high prominent cheekbones, a

triangular nose. She had wide-set eyes capped by aggressively plucked brows in an inverted V. Of course, her skin was perfect, nearly unlined—the result of a myriad of creams, lotions, and other potions and the services of a talented dermatologist and an even more talented plastic surgeon" (5). In both *Conversations with the Fat Girl* and *Alternate Beauty* cosmetic surgery is depicted as the means to "correct" (Palmer 18) and achieve the "perfect" (Waggener 5) body/face. While Palmer privileges the healthy "natural" approach to femininity, Waggener alludes to the possibility that there are no perfect bodies, as even Audrey, whom Ronnie observes as successful in holding "court to a couple of men standing next to her table" (4), is not naturally attractive enough and must therefore seek medical and professional assistance to appear attractive and desirable all of which fuel a significant economy. Audrey's body represents a body that is in complete control although perhaps not her own, compared to Ronnie's out-of-control fat body which places her outside the boundary of femininity and outside the cosmetic industry.

Similar arguments of boundary crossing are evident in Anne Hole's article "Performing Identity: Dawn French and the Funny Fat Female Body" as aforementioned in the Introduction. Hole argues that the fat female body "plays across the binary divides of the sex/gender system" (316), and offers "alternative 'performances' that challenge the gendered basis of the *status quo*" (315, author's emphasis). From this "grotesque subject position" (316), the fat female body is removed from the objectification of the male gaze, and this can be, as Hole argues, a very powerful positioning: "The fat female body, then, is a figure embodying gender ambiguity and instability. Its threshold position and refusal/inability to perform a consistent gender identity makes it a representation of female mobility and mutability, of the move away from traditional feminine pursuits, expectations, and behaviours and into the male-structured world" (319). Hole

warns, however, that "reducing the fat female body to pure spectacle, to a silent image and a site of admiration and male desire, instead of platform for dangerous speech and embodied female desire, appetite, and unruliness, the fat woman's political potential to disrupt conventional feminine stereotypes is undermined" (320). Therefore, Waggener's characterization of Ronnie as a woman who claims she is content in her larger body allows for the possibility of a female protagonist who does not conform to normative gender stereotypes. Hole writes: "By re-locating [the fat female body] at the centre of male desire and inscribing it with the cultural meanings of the female as sex object, she is renouncing the wealth of meanings [. . .] For once all her volumous protuberances are recast as object of male desire (if such a move were possible) then the fat female body ceases to exceed its space – it becomes contained within male heterosexual desire" (320-21). Unfortunately, as Ronnie views her gender performance as inferior to that of her mother's, although she is certainly critical of her mother and her mother's physical appearance, she remains caught in the trappings of her sex as she continues to view herself as an unsuccessful object of male desire.

Waggener attempts to shed light on the impossibility of obtaining a perfect female body; however, the text does not break away from oppressive representations of fat bodies. Ronnie is on the verge of losing her job at Luscious Landing Large Women's Clothing Boutique because her boss feels that, ironically, her large "size is disturbing to the clientele" (Waggener 7). Despite the fact that Ronnie works at a plus-size clothing store, a space where all fat bodies should be welcome, her body is considered too large, suggesting that even within the category of Other, hierarchal relationships still exist and abide by the dichotomy of thin/fat. Again, this is reflected through the relationship that Ronnie shares with her mother, whom she most often submits to throughout the novel because she lacks the confidence to stand up for herself.

Characterized as an emotional overeater, she believes she "made" herself into a shopkeeper by eating and this reinforces her belief that she does not deserve a successful life as a larger woman (18). However, it is also important to observe that Ronnie has been taught to see herself from Audrey's perspective, and it is Audrey who has the power to choose Ronnie's employment:

> The truth was I didn't live, in any way, in the world wanted to live in. Somewhere along the way, I'd abandoned myself. I knew, of course, that obsessing over my weight, allowing it to overshadow my strengths—my talent, my compassion, and my intelligence—was pure stupidity. But I couldn't seem to help myself. I had bought into the party line – that beauty is everything and fat is ugly. Because I couldn't fit myself into this picture, I'd made myself into a different person than I wanted to be. Instead of being Ronnie, the talented designer, I'd become Ronnie, the shopkeeper. Audrey had gotten me the job, of course, Audrey had chosen this life for me. It was all she could imagine for a fat woman. (18)

Audrey maintains control over Ronnie's body because Ronnie views herself as inferior to her mother. Desperate to satisfy her mother, Ronnie remains powerless in the relationship. In both *Conversations with the Fat Girl* and *Alternate Beauty,* family plays a significant role in the identify formation of the fat female narrators. Maggie describes her mother as "physically tiny [. . .] barely tipping the scales at a hundred pounds," and successful both professionally and romantically (Palmer 4-5). Similarly, Ronnie sees Audrey as "perfect" (Waggener 5). These two similar perspectives serve to fuel the self-loathing each protagonist feels as a result of her failure to measure up to the family standard, and their subordinate positions within the family hierarchy.

Audrey, however, is not the only means by which Ronnie defines herself as failure; rather, her perspective is also informed by members of the opposite sex. Within the first ten pages of the novel, her fat body is rejected by her family, her employer, and a group of male strangers, all of which reinforce body discourse that deems the fat female body is a body that is unattractive and therefore undesirable. While on a date with her boyfriend, Gilbert, no other men pay any attention to her, and as such her fat body is rejected as it is not deemed feminine and attractive. Ronnie narrates: "I passed a table of four men, all drinking beer from long-neck bottles, all in shirtsleeves, their ties loosened, all good-looking. I smiled. Three of them looked at me. No, make that looked through me. I can't say that was the worst part of being obese. But it wasn't pleasant. I was invisible to them. There was an irony. I took up more room than any of the women in the place and yet I was invisible" (9). In a parallel statement to Maggie's observations of the fat woman stuck in the restaurant booth, Ronnie personally witnesses that her size is not attractive to members of the opposite sex. In seeking validation from men other than Gilbert as a means of valuing herself, Ronnie reinforces the idea that the female, as Other, can only define herself in relation to man as the object of his desire. Ronnie believes she would be happier if she were smaller because her mother would love her, she would not lose the job she enjoys, and men other than Gilbert would pay more sexual attention to her. Yet, she maintains that she loves her fat body, even if only as a front.

Ronnie claims that she accepts her larger body; however, it is evident by her narration that her self-acceptance is something she is learning and something with which she struggles daily. Much of her body acceptance derives from the *Oprah Winfrey Show*: "I accept myself unconditionally, I told myself, using yet another of Oprah's self-love affirmations I'd learned from her show" (6). The fact, that Ronnie must heed the advice of a television show reinforces

the notion that women need to be conditioned and told how to think and feel, even if it is from another woman, especially one who has authority over the subject. Consider for instance, the media attention over Oprah's body as, in most headlines, her weight overshadows her successes. It is ironic that Ronnie, who is a stranger to exercise and who loves to overindulge, enlists the advice of Oprah, whose body-love propaganda merely reinforces that every woman should love her body and therefore take care of it through proper diet and daily exercise, effectively promoting a thin body, or at least the quest for achieving a healthy, thin, beautiful body. Not only does Ronnie silently repeat Oprah's self-love affirmations, she has also trained herself to behave in a certain manner depending on her social engagements. While dining with her mother at a restaurant, for example, Ronnie's narration reveals a less than self-satisfied attitude: "I love myself exactly as I am, I repeated several times silently in my head. My gaze roamed over the menu, lingered on the French Dip and the Broiled Crab and Cheese sandwiches and went obediently to the salads" (4). Ronnie desires to be accepted by her mother, and she performs as a smaller woman would by ordering a salad rather than a more fattening meal which she actually prefers. This need to hide her desire for food reinforces body discourse that female bodies must be controlled, especially in public, and after years of disappointing her mother, Ronnie has learned how to appease her by appearing to control her appetite in public. In hiding her hunger for food and making meal choices that satisfy Audrey's desires for respectability, Ronnie allows the thin female body (Audrey) to have control over her own fat body. Like Maggie, Ronnie feels the need to hide her desires for food while in public; however, in private Ronnie does not hold back as she frantically reaches for food as a means to comfort herself, exemplifying her lack of control, a characteristic which she shares with many of her Chick Lit sisters.

In her article entitled "Sex and the Single Girl: Helen Fielding, Erica Jong and Helen Gurley Brown," Imelda Whelehan compares *Bridget Jones's Diary* to *Fear of Flying* and a self-help manual, both of which were best-sellers in the 1970s. She examines the protagonists' shared desire to attain happiness and romance by bettering themselves, and the ultimate shared rejection of self-help manuals as a means to conquer their faults and achieve happiness. Whelehan writes:

> Bridget Jones and her friends recognize that while they are formally and legally acknowledged – through their jobs, their standard of education, their social mobility and their consumption choices – as men's equals, their personal lives have to abide by different rules if they are to find Mr. Right – and those rules, contained in self-help manuals [. . .], encourage women to play down their rational, self-determined "feminist" self for a retrograde unthreatening one. (Whelehan 38)

In the above quotation, Whelehan is referring to the rigid sex/gender roles identified by Gilbert and Gubar. Characterized as virgins or whores, women compete with other women for the attention of men in the marriage market. In Fielding's text, Bridget believes that until she can control herself and adhere to the rules of her self-help books she will remain a singleton. Similar to Bridget's desire to control her unfeminine behaviours of excessive drinking and smoking, so too do Bigger Girl Lit protagonists like Ronnie and Maggie desire to control their eating as a means of achieving smaller, more feminine and desirable bodies. In *Conversations with the Fat Girl,* Maggie seeks the assistance of a male personal trainer as a means of losing weight. Through his guidance and encouragement, and the act of writing down her food intake and exercise output in a personal log/journal (thus creating the illusion of autonomy), she learns how to maintain a healthy lifestyle. Her body shrinks and becomes manageable or controllable, and

the message is that women must learn, from men, how to care for and control themselves and their appetites. Similarly, in *Alternate Beauty,* Waggener attempts to subvert traditional perceptions of beauty by developing a space where fat bodies are adored by all; but in the process she reinforces the normative party line. All the attention that Ronnie receives in the parallel universe makes her so happy that her interest in food decreases as her interest in the opposite sex increases, reinforcing the message of the novel that food and sex are both part of the same "dark" region of women's (un)controllable appetites.

Like Bridget, Ronnie is also characterized as being out-of-control. At the onset of the novel we are introduced to three hundred pound Ronnie whose inability to control her food intake has resulted in her size twenty-eight figure and the possibility of losing her job. While Ronnie is eating her narration alludes to body discourse that deems that fat bodies are fat because they have insatiable appetites. The idea that Ronnie has no control over her eating is emphasized by Waggener's use of language. For example, after a particularly difficult day including a light lunch with her mother, and a disappointing dinner date with Gilbert, Ronnie returns home to comfort herself with food: "Breathing heavily, I pushed the fleshy side of my thumb against the Tupperware lid's edge. My bright red polish looked stark against the clear plastic. I grimaced, struggled, and finally popped off the lid. Grasping the container in one hand, I yanked open a drawer to grab a fork with the other. The silverware clattered – a comforting jangle of metal against metal" (Waggener 14). Characterized in this manner, Ronnie's reactions to food are more animalistic than human, as evident by her aggressive carnal reactions of grasping, pushing, grabbing, and yanking at her food. Her narration is also sexual with the contrast of her bright red (whore-like) polish and the clear plastic Tupperware, and her breathing is heavy as she engages in the act of eating. As she continues her binge, her actions become more violent:

> I attacked the lasagna, cold and congealed. As I cut through limp, pale pasta and rubbery white cheese, red sauce oozed from between layers and a chunk of sausage about the size of the end of my index finder shot out and hit the side of the container. I recoiled. For an instant, I considered tossing the whole thing down the disposal or at least sticking it in the microwave to warm it up so it looked more appetizing. I stared at the cylindrical chunk of sausage. Fat shimmered over its surface. (14)

Ronnie's narration reads like a scene from the ER as she hurriedly dissects her meal, not even pausing to sit down. Her disgust toward the cold, leftover food is reinforced by her "recoiled" reaction; however, this disgust is overshadowed by her desire to sooth herself: "Hurry, a voice whispered in the back of [her] mind" (14). This need pushes her forward: "Closing my eyes, I cut loose a large bite and shoveled it into my mouth. My shoulders relaxed. I shoved in a second bite, and my shoulders dropped some more. Closing my mind to what I was doing, I shoveled, chewed, and swallowed. With each bite, the tension fled my body" (14-15). The tone of Ronnie's narration turns sexual once again as eating triggers a physical reaction within her body. Waggener alludes to the message of her text that overeating results in fat bodies: Ronnie would rather deny her actions cause her large size, as she admits to "closing [her] mind" to her out-of-control behaviour, seemingly, as a coping strategy. Parallel to her sexual reactions, food has drug-like affects on Ronnie as she admits: "[t]he two Fifth Avenue bars I'd eaten in the car on the way home had taken the edge off just a little, but I needed more. Pasta, cheese, sausage, and red sauce rich with oregano and pepper – the flavors touched my tongue like a heavy-handed lover's caress. I groaned" (15). Her binge eating is fueled by her desire to feed her self-worth. Because she is not the successful fashion designer she aspires to be, she believes she can only exist at the margin of the fashion industry as a fat store manager. Both Bridget and Ronnie

exhibit out-of-control behaviours that place them outside of the realm of what is acceptable behaviour for "good" women, and as such both feel inadequate as they fail to meet these socially and culturally-constructed expectations. Bridget's inability to quit smoking and drinking in favour of following the strict guidelines of her many self-help books demonstrates her desire to successfully perform her gender. By comparison, as a Bigger Girl Lit protagonist, Ronnie feels most pressure to be thin, and because of this pressure she is attempts to control her food intake while in public. Just as Bridget fails to follow the strict rules of the self-help manuals in favour of being herself, Ronnie also rejects the pursuit of perfection and she does not agree to having the array of plastic surgery her mother suggests once her fat body becomes a size ten (357). Contrary to their Chick Lit sisters, who Case argues reject self-help manuals and bettering themselves, Bigger Girl Lit protagonists do not believe that their weight loss has produced their success, but the message remains that thinness and successfulness are intimately connected as the protagonists are thin by the end of the novel. By the conclusion of *Alternate Beauty,* Ronnie's body is not perfect but she is smaller and she intends to stay thin:

> I remained a size ten. My appetite improved, but I became more active, and the extra calories were burned up by living, by happiness. I discovered there was no need for dieting when you had joy. Back when I used to dream about being a size ten, I'd never thought about the reality of skin stretched to over three hundred pounds, then emptied of its filling. I'd thought a size ten was in and of itself perfection. But my skin still sagged. If I'd been a kangaroo, my offspring would have fit nicely in the pouch of flab above my pelvis. Even so, I didn't have any plastic surgery, and I knew I never would. What I did instead was start a routine that firmed up my muscles. The woman who had wanted to

> sculpt herself into the perfect shape no longer existed. What mattered was that I was healthy and happy and I loved myself the way I was. (370)

Parallel to how surgery is vilified within *Conversations with the Fat Girl,* Ronnie also rejects the idea of surgery as a means of achieving a "perfect" appearance; however, her decision to "sculpt" her body naturally merely reiterates what surgery, or artificial methods, offer. Furthermore, sculpting acts as an illusion of self-control as she, rather than the surgeon, is the artist. In the end, Ronnie rejects having plastic surgery, which would make her body "perfect" in her mother's eyes, but she still has what she wanted all along – a smaller body. Ronnie narrates: "It felt wondrous to be in a smaller body" (247). Ronnie's narration of her smaller body connotes a more feminine appearance, despite the fact that it is not "perfection" (370), whereas previously she describes her fat body in very masculine terms. By describing her fat body as a masculine body, she is reinforcing body discourse that deems larger bodies are not feminine. As she looks at naked pictures of herself taken months before, she is disgusted at her three-hundred-pound body: "It was hard to look at the pictures. There was so much white, bulging fat, so much cottage-cheese rippled skin. The massive folds of my belly piled on each other like a shelfful of pillows, and my breasts looked like a gargantuan jellyfish flopping against each other. The flab of my upper arms hung loose, and even though these were still pictures, I could almost see the fat jiggling against the black velvet backdrop. I looked horrible" (232). Ronnie describes her body in words like "bulging," "massive," and "gargantuan" to describe her size. Her larger body does not appear feminine, or even human, as she describes her stomach as looking like a pile of pillows and her breasts like a creature of the sea. Once Ronnie realizes that beauty is an internal, rather than an external, quality, she is returned to the real world with a new appreciation for her body; however, the implication that Ronnie has completely changed her outlook on larger and

smaller bodies is overestimated. Prior to waking up in the alternate reality, Ronnie presents her fat body as undesirable and awkward. She does her best to "lumber with dignity" (9), but concedes that her "ponderous waddle" is more like a "graceless lurch" (4). After losing weight, Ronnie still struggles with her body, but she is happier as a smaller size. While living life in the parallel universe facilitates Ronnie's ability to identify how body-obsessed her perceptions are by experiencing success in a larger body, it does not alter the value that Ronnie places on thin bodies. Because of her loose skin post-weight loss, Ronnie's body still evades the desired feminine appearance and she still refers to her body as less human and more like a kangaroo. Granted, the simile alludes to motherhood and is therefore more closely tied to her desire to achieve a successful gender performance. She admits that her body does not look like the smaller body she desired as a fat woman, but Ronnie will continue to improve her appearance, as her journey to self-acceptance does not address her sudden out-of-control sexual adventures and need for validation from men. Large or small, Ronnie's attractiveness is dependent upon who is viewing her.

Ronnie cares what men think about her appearance, and in both realities she needs their approval and validation to feel better about her body size; that said, Waggener's characterization of the male characters in the text alludes to the hierarchy that exists within the binary fat/thin. For example, in the alternate universe, while attending a lavish party at her mother's home, Ronnie is still not comfortable with her now acceptable fat body; however, as she is greeted by the butler who winks at her and tells her she looks lovely, she admits: "I'm glad he'd said what he did. I wasn't sure about my dress. Even with the pale green silk shawl I had draped around my shoulder, the dress showed a whole lot more skin than I'd even shown before. Taking a breath, I let the shawl slip off my shoulders. I'd draped it over my left arm and gripped the green

velvet clutch I'd bought the day before. I tried not to think about what I looked like in the dress I'd chosen" (110). Ronnie is put at ease by the butler's approval of her dress to the point that she feels comfortable enough to relax and show more skin by letting the shawl fall from her grip, reinforcing her desire to attract male attention by revealing more of her body. Just prior to the above quotation Ronnie admits that the butler, "Wilcox[,] seemed to be the same in this reality" as in her old, and "he'd always told [her she] looked lovely, no matter how fat [she was]" (110). The relationship that Ronnie shares with Wilcox demonstrates the role that class occupies within heterosexual desire. Ronnie is not attracted to the butler in either universe, as she views him as her mother's hired help rather than an economic equal, and as such, the compliments she receives from him have little value in her old universe, because his attention is not the attention she seeks. In a subservient position, it is also unclear whether Wilcox's compliments are genuine or part of the discourse employees reserve for employees and their families and friends. A similar episode is found in Palmer's text when Maggie asserts herself for the first time and attempts to gain control of her body by telling off a Latina woman working at a Taco Stand who Maggie views as racially inferior to herself (176). In both instances the protagonists believe they are superior to these minor characters, and they are therefore comfortable enough with themselves to oppress them. Nevertheless, once Ronnie is told by Wilcox that she is attractive, she believes she is, and this reinforces the message that Woman can only define herself as an object of (any) man's desire. This is further emphasized when Ronnie first allows the wealthy and successful photographer, Jason, to photograph her naked body. Prior to beginning the photo shoot Ronnie is nervous to expose her fat body; however, once Jason assures her she is attractive she allows him to see her body. Ronnie narrates:

> Jason took up position behind his camera and began clicking away. With each shot, I became more and more relaxed. By the time Jason asked me to remove my shoes, stockings, and garter belt, and undo my hair, I had left behind all self-consciousness. In a sense, I'd left behind my body as well. Which was odd, because I was more in my body and more about my body on that evening than I had ever been. I guess it would be more accurate to say I left behind my perceptions about my body. I was no longer Ronnie, the fat woman. I was just Ronnie, and a gorgeous man's attention was riveted on me.
>
> Jason talked to me the entire time he took photographs. "So sexy," he said over and over. Or, "Beautiful." Or, "Stunning." Or, "Ah, yes, like that. Perfect." (167)

Jason has complete control of the photo shoot and as a result Ronnie sees herself through the male gaze. In *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, Laura Mulvey employs the psychoanalytic theories of Freud and Lacan to explore mainstream Hollywood film and how it utilizes a practice wherein "pleasure in looking [is] split between active/male and passive/female" (2186). Mulvey explains that as objects of male desire, women appear as "spectacles" for the protagonist who is typically male, and thus the audience assumes the male subject positioning. She writes: "In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness"* (2186, author's emphasis). Only when Jason, who she refers to as "a gorgeous man," instructs Ronnie to remove her clothing and tells her she is "stunning" and "beautiful" is she comfortable enough to get naked, as she herself still does not view her own body as attractive. As aforementioned, she sees herself through the male gaze and this demonstrates her invitation for the reader to see her from that subjective gaze as well. What she reveals is not what her body looks like, but the lingerie

stereotypically used in strip-teases. She concedes that during the photo shoot she is finally comfortable in her body and she believes that she has escaped the trappings of the fat female body and she is finally freed; she is just Ronnie. However, such a statement is contradictory to her situation, as the very reason that Jason is photographing her is because of her fat body and not because of who she is as a person, and therefore, contrary to what she believes, she remains Ronnie the fat woman, a spectacle on display for Jason's approving viewing. It is his speech acts, "[s]o sexy," "beautiful," and "stunning," that compel her to perform her role. When Ronnie loses weight and is no longer viewed as attractive in Jason's eyes, he dismisses her and her body is once again rejected. In both realities, Ronnie is comforted by the encouragement and approval she receives from Wilcox, but she is most encouraged and excited by the men that she finds attractive and desirable and she pursues their approval and reciprocal desire.

Waggener reinforces the idea that bodies are fat due to emotional overeating, as evident in the parallel universe where Ronnie no longer seeks comfort from food even though fat, and overeating, are in fad. While dining out with two of her best friends one of the first nights that she awakens in the parallel universe, for instance, it is quickly evident that food is of less interest to her. Ronnie narrates: "We spent the remainder of the dinner talking about our respective jobs. When the waitress came to clear our plates, she asked me again if I was finished. I glanced down at the few bites of manicotti and half-eaten piece of garlic bread still left on my plate. I shrugged and waved it away" (Waggener 65). Leaving food on her plate is not a typical behaviour in her old reality, yet in a world where fat is beautiful, Ronnie no longer seeks comfort from food, and she would rather spend her time focusing on her professional and sexual success. These are two qualities from which her fat body excluded her from participating in the "real" world; however, she reaps their benefits in the alternate reality where, as a beautiful woman,

Ronnie spends most of her time dating various men she meets through work and social gatherings. Her first date in the parallel universe is with a man that her friends deem to be "not that great-looking" (65); however, to Ronnie, who previously describes her boyfriend Gilbert as resembling a "chipmunk" (10), Aaron represents a "real" man, and she is attracted to his manly scent and verbal cues. She cannot imagine foregoing the opportunity to have sex with a man who thinks her "lumpy, large butt [is] a 'beautiful ass'" (80), and she ultimately succumbs to his desire when he tells her she is beautiful and her "body is perfect" (81). Her reaction to Aaron's approval is very different from her reaction to Gilbert's compliments in her old reality; when he calls her beautiful, she responds with a groan (10). Ronnie views Aaron as attractive despite what her girlfriends believe. Ronnie thinks that Gilbert is "as good as [she can] get" (11) in her old reality, which is why she stays with him despite her lack of interest in and attraction to him. She groans at his sexual advances because she does not view him as attractive, and as such his opinion of her has less significance than Aaron's. While leaving the restaurant with Aaron, Ronnie feels self-conscious as he touches a roll of fat on her back; however, she is comforted when he tells her that every guy in the room is envious of him and that she is not only beautiful, but the "most beautiful woman" in the restaurant (77), reinforcing the competition that women are placed in by men. When Aaron fails to call for a couple of days, Ronnie is unperturbed and becomes more interested in other future sexual encounters than food. Her attitude transforms Ronnie from an out-of-control overeater to an out-of-control sex addict: "The truth was I didn't want to see Aaron again. It wasn't that there was anything wrong with him. He was nice and interesting. I'd had a great time with him, and the sex had been fantastic. But he was just a bag of M&Ms on a candy rack. I still had all the other candy bars to taste. I wasn't going to limit myself" (128). As an out-of-control sex addict who validates herself through men, whom she

identifies as candy to be consumed, Ronnie remains trapped. By characterizing Ronnie in the alternate universe as a woman who cannot get enough sex, her transformation reinforces that fat bodies are out-of-control as Waggener is merely replacing one unruly behaviour for another, maintaining discourse that deems that women, by nature, lack control and that fat women have insatiable appetites, whether for food and/or sex.

Contrary to Ronnie's disinterest in food in the parallel universe, every other character in the novel cannot get enough food. Ronnie narrates: "I looked around the restaurant and saw people plowing through mounds of pasta with great enthusiasm and not even a little guilt. Clearly, in this reality, people enjoyed food with abandon" (64). Waggener's discourse in the above quotation alludes to the larger contradiction that exists within the text: that eating to excess is pleasurable. Granted, she is reversing the role of dieting in the alternate universe. In his text, *Never Satisfied: A Cultural History of Diets, Fantasies and Fat*, author Hillel Schwartz envisions a "Fat Utopia" similar to the parallel universe Waggener attempts to create. However, if we subscribe to Schwartz's version, then Waggener's version fails by comparison. Schwartz explains that "[i]n a fat society, dinners would be scrumptious, sociable and warm. [. . .] Feeding would be calm and loving, always sufficient, never forced. [. . .] A fat society would be less harshly competitive, less devouring" (324- 326). Ronnie's narration demonstrates the opposite of Schwartz's vision as the restaurant patrons are "plowing" through their meals, and Ronnie observes people "stuffing their faces" (Waggener 76); eating is represented as urgent and disgusting, contrary to Schwartz's definition. Food is also portrayed as less than appetizing as Ronnie describes it as "artery-clogging" (201), and she even compares a pile of dumplings to "dirty baseballs" (200). These examples point to an inconsistency in Waggener's text: if the parallel universe is meant to glorify fat bodies and the food that creates fat bodies, the discourse

used to describe the food and the act of eating is anything but appealing. Despite the fact that prior to awakening in the alternate universe Ronnie wishes she lived "in a world where fat is beautiful" (21), a conversation with her girlfriend who is struggling to enlarge her body confirms that over-eating is unacceptable in any reality: "'Yeah. I know I've tried before and never could stick with it.' She sighed. 'With my speedy metabolism, I just can't eat enough to put on weight.' Her normally cheerful expression twisted into frustration. [. . .] She sighed again and picked up another piece of bread, looking at it like it was a brussel sprout" (62). Through her characterization, Waggener reinforces that fat bodies are only attained through over-eating, as evident by the characters who stuff themselves in hopes of gaining weight, much like people who starve themselves to lose weight in our reality.

One night when the mood in the text is similarly eerie to how it was the night before she awakens in the parallel universe, Ronnie is depressed and working on one of her designs when she suddenly realizes that the mess of fabric scraps are beautiful, and these scraps of fabric help to demonstrate to her that beauty is an internal rather than external quality (344-45). Ronnie's realization that beauty is an internal quality rather than an external quality results in her decision to design clothing for women of all sizes, and with this new vision of beauty, Ronnie is returned to the original reality with a new sense of purpose: "I want to start my own boutique, a dress shop featuring my own designs. I'm thinking of a place that has clothes for every size and shape from teeny to gargantuan. I want to create designer clothes that will help women celebrate themselves as they are, not as they should be" (363). Ronnie does not even question her relationship with Gilbert, or the fact that while he was worrying about her unexplained year long absence she was having sex with other men. Whelehan argues that in Arabella Weir's *Does My Bum Look Big in This?* "an obvious imitator of *Bridget Jones*" (33), the main character

Jacqueline makes fun of her larger body throughout her narration, and as such her message cannot be taken seriously when she vows to create a world where it's safe to have a big bum" (qtd. in Whelehan 33). Whelehan writes: "The language of social responsibility may well be used to underscore the humour and sheer bathos of her 'message', but the novel offers us a woman who cannot walk out of the room because of her obsession with her rear and is pathologically unable to recognize herself as attractive to men" (33). *Alternate Beauty* concludes with Ronnie's declaration of social responsibility to design women's clothing that fits every body size; however, the novel offers a protagonist whose out-of-control behaviour is never resolved but rather transferred from food to sex and then seemingly forgotten once her body is a size ten, thus reinforcing that thin bodies are desirable, and successful, and in control.

Chapter Three

Large and in Charge?: (Mis)Conceptions of Control in *Good in Bed*

In the previous chapter, I examined how Waggener's attempt to invert traditional notions of beauty fails to capture an adequate representation of a "Fat Utopia" (as defined by Schwartz). Ronnie lacks control over her own body. Hence, what has the potential of subverting the thin/fat binary that troubles Bigger Girl Lit protagonists is actually yet another example of how these texts support and subscribe to the very ideology they seem to challenge. Jennifer Weiner's *Good in Bed* is no exception. Throughout *Good in Bed*, Weiner demonstrates the socially-constructed hierarchal relationship that exists between desired, thin female bodies and undesired, fat female bodies as seen though the eyes of the protagonist, Candace Shapiro. In a culture where thin bodies are privileged, Candace, also known as Cannie, desires to have a smaller body because she believes that a smaller body will grant her a more successful and rewarding love life. Again, Cannie's belief reinforces the message that thin bodies are more desirable and more successful than fat ones. Just as Audrey has authority over Ronnie's body in *Alternate Beauty,* so too does Cannie's father have authority over her body, at least initially, as she believes there is a connection between his absence and her body. It is he who is largely responsible for making her feel inadequate. Similar to *Conversations with the Fat Girl,* as Maggie learns self-control from her personal trainer Gabriel, Cannie also gains self-confidence and control over her life and body with the help of a weight-loss doctor, Peter Krushelevansky. Weiner attempts to challenge the notion of an ideal female body by creating a character whose intelligence and self-awareness save her from oppressive subordination, but as Cannie is only able to identify herself as (fat) Other she ultimately reinforces the binary of fat/thin. As a "larger woman" Cannie often feels inadequate and threatened when among thin women because she accepts what her society has

taught her: that fat bodies mark failure. The articles that her ex-boyfriend writes about her, paired with her brief stay at the Weight and Eating Disorder Center, reinforce her pursuit for thinness. While Cannie's self-aware narration attempts to reject the unjust Othering of the fat female body, she is ultimately unsuccessful as she remains trapped in her role as a woman who is only able to define herself in relation to man as the object of his desire. When Cannie feels she is no longer able to fulfill her role as a woman because she fails to keep her baby daughter safe (323), and her hysterectomy prevents her from having any more children (343), her character transforms back to being rude and sarcastic and she is forced back outside of the boundaries of conventional femininity.

Contrary to Maggie and Ronnie, the actual dress size and weight of twenty-eight year old Cannie is never revealed; however, Weiner establishes early in the novel that Cannie is a large woman by her society's standards and that she is not happy being categorized as "fat." Weiner's characterization of Cannie as size-less points to a larger issue that women have with their bodies, in that no matter the size, many women dislike their bodies and as a result they learn to hate them. Numerous times throughout the novel Cannie confesses specific moments in her childhood where she is made aware that her body is out of bounds. For example:

> I remember when I was fourteen or so, on summer vacation somewhere by the beach, walking down a sidewalk with my sister, my slender sister, Lucy. We were wearing baseball caps and shorts and bathing suits and flip-flops. We were eating ice-cream cones. I could close my eyes and see the way my tanned legs looked against my white shorts, the sensation of the ice cream melting on my tongue. A kindly-looking white haired lady had approached us with a smile. I thought she'd say something like how we reminded her of her granddaughters, or made her miss her own sister and the fun they'd

> had together. Instead, she nodded at my sister, walked up to me, and pointed at the ice cream cone. 'You don't need that, dearie,' she'd said. 'You should be on a diet.' I remembered things like that. A lifetime's accretion of unkindness, all of those little lingering hurts that I carried around like stones sewn into my pockets. The price you paid for being a Larger Woman. (43-44)

In the above quotation Weiner is demonstrating the control that society has over young Cannie as this memory, and others like it, have taught her to believe that her body is a "fat" body. Prior to her encounter with the older woman, Cannie is not concerned with the size or shape of her body, and yet as the "kind" old woman indicates by her approving nod, Lucy is "slender" and Cannie is not. This character, a grandmother-like figure, is positioned as a kind of authority over Cannie's body, teaching her that her body is too large, as is her appetite. However kind her approach, this woman feels she has the right to comment on Cannie's body and eating habits, and her suggestion that Cannie "should be on a diet" demonstrates a desire to assist Cannie toward earning success. This is a pivotal defining moment in Cannie's perception of her own body, one which Weiner uses to allude to the role that memory plays in the fat identity.

Similar to the experiences of Maggie and Ronnie, many of Cannie's childhood memories have assisted in shaping how she views her body, and the memories she is most fixated on are those of her father—the first man who she believes rejects her because of her "fat" body. Cannie narrates: "When I was twelve I learned that I was fat. My father told me, pointing at the insides of my thighs and the undersides of my arms with the handle of his tennis racquet. We'd been playing, I remember, and I was flushed and sweaty, glowing with the joy of movement. You'll need to watch that, he told me, poking me with the handle so that the extra flesh jiggled. Men don't like fat women" (364). Rather than consider how she feels within her own body, or the

satisfaction she receives from physical activity and spending time with her father, Cannie learns that her body is not a desired body for male sexual desire/gratification. Cannie's relationship with her body and her father are comparable to Lacan's theory of the mirror stage, as Cannie learns to identify her body within the symbolic order of the phallus. Drawing on Freud's psychoanalytic theory, Lacan explains how an infant enters into the symbolic realm, and the identification and "transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image" based on his reflection in the mirror (Lacan 1286). This initial identification begins "from the age of six months" (1285), at which point there is no knowledge of an Other, and it occurs "before language restores to [the infant], [. . .] its function as a subject" (1286). Lacan terms this identifications as the ideal-I. This identification process ends when the infant identifies himself with his parent, the Other, and becomes subjected to the symbolic order. Lacan writes: "This moment in which the mirror-stage comes to an end inaugurates, by the identification with the *imago* of the counterpart and the drama of primordial jealousy [. . .], the dialectic that will henceforth link the *I* to socially elaborated situations" (1289). Just as the identification of the infant in Lacan's text is based on its relationship with an Other, so too is Cannie's fat-girl identity formed through her relationship with her father, as it is his opinion of fat bodies that informs her view of body sizes, particularly her own. She narrates: "the Gospel according to my father: I was fat and I was ugly and nobody would ever love me" (Weiner 84). According to Lacan, the process of identification is reserved for men only, and consequently, women exist outside the boundary of language in "the prelinguistic moment when the child is not separate from the mother and therefore has no need of language" (Kolmar 43). As a result, women have no frame of reference within the "symbolic matrix" (Lacan 1286). From this subject position Cannie is only able to identify her body through her father's gaze, and at the young age of

thirteen she convinces herself that her father, a plastic surgeon, abandons the family because of her physical inadequacies, particularly her fat body. She states: "He was all about beauty – its creation, its maintenance, its perfection. Having a wife who'd fallen short of the mark and hadn't stayed thin was one thing, I supposed… but a daughter who'd failed so flagrantly was, evidently, unforgivable. And I had failed. There was nothing beautiful about me at thirteen, nothing at all, and I could feel that fact confirmed in the hard, hateful way he looked at me, and in all the things he said" (Weiner 104-105). Cannie feels her body is solely responsible for her father's absence, and she consequently disregards the fact that her mother's body was less-than-perfect, or, even more importantly, her mother's announcement that she is a lesbian, which she reveals shortly after her father's departure. Rather than acknowledge her mother's sexual orientation as an escape from compulsory heterosexuality, Cannie assumes responsibility for her father's abandonment at the cost of her self-identity.

In her text "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," Adrienne Rich draws on the writing of Kathleen Gough in "The Origin of the Family" to explain the various ways in which women are subjected to male tyranny, and she provides as an example of this oppression "men's ability to deny women sexuality or to force it upon them" (qtd. in Rich 304). Rich writes: "[h]eterosexuality has been both forcibly and subliminally imposed on women" (307). In Cannie's narration it is evident that her father positions her within the economy of the male gaze by teaching her to become an object of male desire. Comparatively, her mother is free from his sexual oppression as her lesbian status is a powerful position that removes her from the male-identified category of Woman and the libidinal economy. In their text "The Woman-Identified Woman," Radicalesbians encourage women to escape from heterosexual oppression, arguing that "[a]s long as [women] are dependent on the male culture for [male] definition, for [male]

approval, [women] cannot be free" (166). Similarly, Cixous warns women to "[b]eware of diagnoses that [. . .] reduce [women's] generative powers" (2055). In adopting her father's gaze, Cannie remains trapped within what Cixous refers to as "psychoanalytic closure" (2055) of her father's authority, and this oppressive position informs her negative perception of her body into her young adult life. When Cannie reconnects with her father when she is seven months pregnant she wears a fake diamond ring "of such breathtaking enormity, [and] such improbable size" in order to "announce to [her] father in general and the world at large that [she'd] arrived" (Weiner 297). Size, in a patriarchal capitalist society, does matter. When her friend, Maxi, questions her desire to deceive her father, Cannie responds: "I looked at the rings on my finger. 'I guess it's that he said nobody would ever love me, that nobody would ever want me. And I feel like if I see him, and I'm pregnant and I'm not married… it'll be like he was right'" (298). At this point in the text Cannie is unable to recognize her powerful position as a successful single mother, and instead she believes the (fake) ring is a necessary accessory to pass as a "good" Woman. By continuing to uphold male-dominated definitions of femininity, Cannie demonstrates that she still does not have control over her body.

This self-perception shifts however, when Cannie unrepentantly runs into her ex-boyfriend, Bruce, and he is unable to recover from the sight of her large belly (304). Cannie seizes this meeting as her chance to assert her self-worth and privileged position as a single, pregnant, and financially independent woman by attacking Bruce and his new girlfriend, describing him as "some big goofy guy" who smokes too much pot, and E. as "the victim" to his inadequacies as a man (307). Cannie considers Bruce to be beneath her financially; as she explains, she has "plenty of money, and a better job than he does" (307). As with Ronnie and Wilcox, class (and money in particular) trumps gender/sex. This reversal of traditional gender

roles enables Cannie to reject Bruce, and ultimately the control he has over her body, as she finally admits that she is strong enough and capable enough "to do just fine" without him (308); however, her response to Bruce is undermined when she suddenly goes into premature labour and nearly loses her baby daughter, Joy, at which point Cannie is returned to her state of helplessness as she believes she has failed as a woman and mother: "But what was really wrong—the part that I didn't think I'd be able to bring myself to say—was that I had failed Joy. I'd failed to be good enough, pretty enough, thin enough, lovable enough, to keep my father in my life. Or to keep Bruce. And now, I'd failed at keeping my baby safe" (323). Forming a link between her ability to be a good mother and beauty, Cannie locates herself back into the rigid category of the female gender/sex. The relationship between Cannie and her father and Cannie and her ex-boyfriend parallel each other: Cannie blames herself (her fat body) for her father and ex-boyfriend leaving her.

Just as Cannie's self-perception is influenced by her father's authority, she also allows the language Bruce uses to describe her body to control how she perceives herself. In a magazine article entitled "Loving a Larger Woman," Bruce describes Cannie's body size as "five foot ten inches, with a linebacker's build and a weight that would have put her right at home on a pro football team's roster" (14). This description does not provide a clear indication of Cannie's actual body size; however, it is known that she is tall and despite her seemingly proportionate features for her height, she is described by her ex-boyfriend as having masculine qualities, which may raise questions about his sexual preferences. Later that same day, Cannie describes her own appearance as follows: "Hair, light brown with streaks of copper, cut in a basic bob and shoved behind [her] ears, also present. No makeup. Hint—well, actuality—of a double chin. Full cheeks, round sloping shoulders, double D-cup breasts, fat fingers, thick hips, big ass, thighs

solidly muscled beneath a quivering blanket of lard" (19). In her own description of herself it is evident that she is unhappy with her body by her "sloping" shoulders and her muscle which is hidden under "a quivering" layer of fat (19). The words "full," "thick," and "big" all compliment Bruce's previous description of Cannie's seemingly masculine features, as such words are more commonly associated with male bodies, and furthermore "solidly muscled" perpetuates the image of Cannie as a larger, athletic woman, rather than a small, meek and feminine woman. Her lack of makeup and hair "shoved behind [her] ears" demonstrates her lack of desire to perform according to conventional gender norms, which could be read as a powerful position for any woman who seeks to dismantle stereotypes of femininity. The belief that Cannie is fat is emphasized in Bruce's article as he refers to her as a "big girl" (13) and he as a "chubby chaser" (14). Her body is further defined as fat in relation to Bruce's male body: "I'll never forget the day I found out my girlfriend weighed more than I did" (13). By virtue of being the male body's opposite, the female body is supposed to be smaller, and because Cannie is heavier in weight than Bruce, she is considered fat, demonstrating the anxiety he has over her body size. Because the descriptions provided of Cannie place her outside the boundary of what is considered feminine and attractive by her father's expectations, Cannie is therefore unable to recognize Bruce's desire for her body as he also refers to it as a "warm welcome" full of "sweet curves" (14).

Cannie's belief that she is fat paired with her belief that she must be thin in order to be loved by a man causes her to view other women, particularly thin women, as her competition in the dating/marriage market, and this is particularly true of Bruce's new girlfriend. By virtue of being larger than Bruce's (thin) girlfriend who is only ever known as "E.," Cannie is forced into the position of the (fat) Other. By naming Bruce's new girlfriend "E.," Weiner alludes to the

truth that within a heterosexual economy of viewing, every woman is considered competition. In his article, Bruce writes: "And E. is in every way different from my first love: short where [Cannie] was tall, fine and delicate where [Cannie] was broad and solid, sweet where [Cannie] was bitterly, mordantly funny" (174-75). Bruce's comparison of the two women emphasizes the competition men force women into in the marriage market. In his final article about his new love, Bruce describes E.'s "wonderful hands," as "tiny and slender and soft, so different from [his] own" (227). His description highlights E.'s feminine qualities, while at the same time emphasizes Cannie's more masculine features as she is E.'s opposite. John Berger, in his text *Ways of Seeing*, examines hidden ideologies that exist within visual images of women, and he argues that "[m]en *act* and women *appear*. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women, but also the relation of women to themselves" (47, author's emphasis). Effectively, Cannie compares herself to the descriptions Bruce provides of E. as a means of evaluating herself. When Cannie unexpectedly meets Bruce and E. at the airport, Cannie sees E. for the first time and describes her appearance as average and not feminine: "Short, pale, her hair in a pageboy. Light blue jeans, a pale yellow Oxford shirt tucked in. Nondescript, fade-into-the-woodwork clothes, medium features and a medium frame" (Weiner 304). At this point in the novel, Cannie has accomplished her goal of selling her screenplay and her perception of E. as "medium" build is a contrary description to those provided by Bruce which suggests that she has begun to acquire a gaze of her own that is separate from Bruce's while, at the same time, reinforcing the competitive screening that women participate in and the inevitable belittling that ensues – be it of themselves or the other woman. It is only when Cannie is pregnant and financially successful that she does not feel pressure to be thin, and is therefore not threatened by E.'s appearance.

Cannie is also comforted by E.'s "[n]on-descript, fade-into-the-woodwork-clothes," as by comparison, she is more successful at presenting herself as feminine, despite the fact that her body is bigger as she is pregnant. Cannie narrates:

> My new Manolo Blahnik slides gave me an extra three inches that I felt Amazonian, powerful, untroubled by this little wisp of a thing who barely cleared my shoulders. I gave her my very best shut-up-and-let-the-smart-people-talk look, the one I'd perfected over the years on my siblings. I wondered if she'd ever heard of tweezers. Sure, she could probably be looking at me wondering whether I'd ever heard of Slim-Fast...or of birth control, for that matter. I found I didn't much care. (307)

Cannie's description of herself alludes to the myth of femininity because she views her gender performance of wearing expensive haute couture heels (Carrie Bradshaw's preferred brand in *Sex and the City*), as more feminine than E.'s plain t-shirt and jeans. Cannie views her larger body as more powerful than E.'s "wisp" of a body, and once Cannie decides that she does not need to be threatened by E., who she dubs as unintelligent despite the fact that E. was educated at Oxford, she is no longer concerned with her larger body size. In questioning whether or not E. has ever used tweezers, Cannie emphasizes E.'s un-feminine appearance, reinforcing the need to perform gender at the same time. The text privileges Slim-Fast and birth control as two tools available for women to appear to be in control over their bodies; however, Cannie rejects both, signaling the acceptance of her larger body. The insinuation that Cannie is content in her body is undermined by the fact that she is only able to reject the words of her father and of Bruce at E.'s expense as she makes herself feel better by putting E. down. After Cannie nearly loses her baby, she spirals into a depression that nearly kills her. At a dangerously low weight, Cannie loses her way in the city, symbolizing the loss of her sense of self as she believes she has failed as a

mother, and when a man she does not know tells her "[y]ou need help" (345), Cannie admits that this is in fact true, and she seeks Dr. Krushelevansky from the Weight and Eating Disorder Center to rescue her. Weiner attempts to subvert the perceived powerful and privileged position of thin female bodies by representing thin Cannie as weak and sickly, thereby challenging the belief that thin bodies are successful and desirable; however, the message is lost as Cannie must be rescued by the male doctor, thus reinforcing that women must be protected and provided for by men, be he a father, lover, boyfriend, husband, or stranger.

Although Bruce's article names Cannie as "everything but" fat (40), his words, along with the words of her father, continue to control her thoughts and motivate her to diet. A final example of the fat/thin dichotomy in *Good in Bed* is most evident during Cannie's visit to the Weight and Eating Disorders Center, as Weiner's use of socially-constructed hierarchal relationships between fat and thin bodies is further perpetuated when Cannie is surrounded by fat bodies at "Fat Class" (69). The Weight and Eating Disorders Center, and the staff who work in it, reinforce the belief that fat bodies need to be controlled. Weiner quickly establishes that thin bodies are the powerful bodies in control as the only thin bodies in the center belong to the doctor and his staff, and in effect are the bodies that will pass on the secrets for weight-loss success. Thin characters are portrayed as happier in comparison to the disgruntled, fat women who can barely keep from rolling their eyes every chance they get (38). During their first meeting the women are asked to document how and why they are fat, including their diet history, family history, medical history, and psychological history. In doing so, the center perpetuates the belief that an explanation or justification for larger bodies is necessary, and furthermore, that there is a possible explanation and therefore correlation between fat bodies and family, medicine, and/or psychology. Despite desiring to obtain a smaller body, Cannie does not like to diet, and

therefore she is always in a bad mood while at the Center. During her first visit her bad mood intensifies when she is met by a roomful of women "too big to cross their legs, all of [them] wedged into inadequate armchairs" (35), and a "smiling," "skinny," and "chirpily" speaking secretary (35). In her descriptions of her experiences at the Weight and Eating Disorders Center, and her characterization of the women therein, Weiner reinforces negative stereotypes of the fat female body as all of the members of the Fat class are women, insinuating that female bodies comprise the only bodies that are fat and need to be controlled and monitored as these bodies are presented as perpetually on diets. Their ages, ethnicities, and body sizes all range; however, what each woman has in common is her familiarity with the various diet programs available including Weight Watchers and Jenny Craig. Cannie identifies with the other women, as she is easily able to join in on the diet-bashing camaraderie of the group (70); however, while she can identify with the other characters and their struggles to lose weight, she also views herself as somewhat superior to them, as she is among the smallest in the group, insinuating that she has the most control over her body. Such a belief is reminiscent of *Conversations with the Fat Girl* wherein Maggie describes the class-like structure of the "Fat Entity Theory" (77). While Olivia is trying on her wedding dress, Maggie narrates:

> [. . .] I start watching the girl by Olivia. I noticed her when I came back with the disposable camera. She is quite heavy and holds it all in her middle. I know Olivia spotted her as well. It's the reason she's positioned herself four platforms away. Once again, it's the Fat Entity Theory. As in any subculture, there is a pecking order among the overweight ranks. Those afflicted with the disease of obesity constantly compare themselves with other overweight people, the perennial question being whether they are as fat as that woman or this other unfortunate girl. (77)

Just as Maggie perceives Olivia to be superior within the body hierarchy, Cannie also views herself as superior during a session on portion control wherein she believes she already knows everything. She narrates: "The words *Portion Control* were written on a white wipable message board, and there was a poster on one wall. This shit again, I thought, wondering if I could place out of the class. I'd been to Weight Watchers, after all. I knew all about portion control" (69). This is an ironic statement because if it were true, then Cannie would either not have enrolled in the program, nor she would not believe she is fat. Thus, Weiner alludes to a hidden truth that diet industries like Weight Watchers and Jenny Craig do not foster healthy self-images, nor are they useful in achieving weight loss. In her text "My Discourse/My-Self: Therapy as Possibility (For Women Who Eat Compulsively)," Catherine Hopwood considers the ways three popular models of (potential) weight-loss empower women, including: Nutri/System, the London Women's Therapy Center, and Overeaters Anonymous. Hopwood favours programs that promote a "greater knowledge about the self" (Hopwood 79). She writes: "[b]y promoting dependence on external sources such as scales, diets, and computer technology, clients learn to depend on outside sources for monitoring and confirming bodily changes" (73). Weiner's introduction of diet discourse that favours drugs as a necessary means of achieving a small body removes the locus of control from the dieter and places it within medical discourse.

The session is led by a "skinny nurse" (Weiner 70), who Cannie refers to as Nurse Sarah, one of the authorities on weight loss, as if to further emphasize the binary fat/thin. While it appears that the nurse is prepared to impart the center's weight loss wisdom, she, despite her training, fails to focus the group of fat women, and most of their discussion is controlled by Cannie. When Nurse Sarah attempts to refocus the group, Cannie interprets her approach as condescending, when she remarks that losing weight is "very simple" (71). Annoyed with the

nurse's seemingly routine speech about limiting calorie input and maximizing calories burned, Cannie mocks the nurse taking away all her control of the fat group. Cannie narrates: "I suspected that she was probably used to fat ladies sitting meekly in the chairs, like overfed sheep, smiling and nodding, and being grateful for the wisdom she was imparting, staring at her with abashed, admiring eyes, all because she'd had the good fortune of being born thin. The thought infuriated me" (71). Cannie ridicules the nurse because she feels threatened by the power Nurse Sarah possesses as a thin woman, and Cannie does not want to be treated like an attention starved, lazy, and stupid fat animal, all negative stereotypes of the fat female body that she perceives the nurse to be imposing on the group. Cannie seizes the opportunity to gain control of the room by mocking the thin nurse, who is the minority in the room, on the basis that this woman was "born thin," and therefore she cannot understand the struggles of the fat women. Following Cannie's example, the fat ladies mob together chanting for diet pills that they believe will finally grant them weight loss success, and they scare the nurse away. Cannie and the rest of the group find this turn of events very amusing, as they all laugh and Cannie remarks: "[she] [p]robably thought we'd crush her" (73), and another woman adds, "sit on her!" (73), to which Cannie finally remarks: "I hate skinny people" (73). Weiner attempts to subvert the power the diet culture has over the group by having the fat women, with Cannie as their "spokeswoman" (73), reject the oppressive categorization that fat women must be controlled.

The message is lost, however, when a male doctor is introduced to the group, and the power dynamic of fat Cannie having control over thin Nurse Sarah shifts once Cannie sees a thin man. When Dr. Krushelevansky enters the room Cannie observes that he finds the entire ordeal humourous (73), and he immediately gains control of the room when he signals her out to be the voice for the fat women:

> "Is there a spokeswoman?" he asked.
>
> Everyone looked at me. I got to my feet, smoothed my shirt, and cleared my throat. "I think that it's the feeling of the group that we've all been through different lectures and courses and support groups concerning behavior modification." I looked around the table. Everyone seemed to be nodding in agreement. "It's our feeling that we've tried to change our behaviour, and eat less, and exercise more, and all of those things that they tell you to do, and what we'd really like... what we're really here for, what we've all paid for, is something new. Namely drugs," I concluded and sat back in my seat. (73)

It is evident that Cannie's attitude has changed from demanding and rude to respectful and timid in the presence of the male, thin doctor. His control and power over her is obvious as she stands and smoothes her clothes out before addressing him, and seeks encouragement and strength from her fellow fat group members who she now speaks for, thereby emphasizing their voicelessness. Cannie desires to have a smaller body, and having previously admitted to being jealous of thin women (41), it is made clear by her interaction with Dr. Krushelevansky that her scene with Nurse Sarah is less a rejection of the diet lesson and more a verbal attack at another woman simply because she was apparently "born thin." Dr. Krushelevansky is able to successfully calm the group down, as he is a man, and he tells them that diets do not work. Cannie narrates: "Now he had our attention. It was true, we'd all figured this out (from bitter personal experiences, in most cases), but to hear an authority figure, a doctor, a doctor who was running a weight-loss program say it... well, that was practically heresy. I half expected security guards to come rushing through the door and drag him off to be re-brainwashed" (74). Dr. Krushelevansky delivers the same diet message to the fat women that the nurse previously tries to deliver, and the women actively engage in his discussion enthusiastically. They behave quite similar to the

"dumb sheep" stereotype that Cannie tries so hard to avoid as they are easily distracted by the various flavours of doughnuts they discuss, and Cannie herself "licked [her] lips" as the thought of food triggers an animalistic response (75). When Dr. Krushelevansky explains to the group, and essentially to Cannie, "that nobody here will treat [them] like [they are] stupid, no matter what size [they] are" (74), Cannie views the entire situation as empowering. She narrates: "I found I was touched in spite of myself. The guy was actually making sense. Better yet, he wasn't talking down to us. It was...well, revolutionary, really" (74). Cannie is able to accept the diet center's message when it is delivered from Dr. Krushelevansky because she views him as the "authority" on weight-loss and therefore superior to Nurse Sarah who she can only view as her competition. The exchange between Cannie and Dr. Krushelevansky occurs only at the beginning of their doctor/patient relationship, and while it is evident that he is amused and interested by her, Cannie fails to recognize this and she quietly surrenders to his, and ultimately the center's, control reinforcing the message that women, and fat women especially, need to be regulated and controlled by the very structures they despise, and Cannie needs reassurance from men in order to feel validated.

As the (fat) Other, Cannie believes she is undesirable; however, her secondary position as the thin body's Other is based on social-construction and can therefore be rejected because one's body is not a reflection of one's self. Cannie's belief that she is fat is socially determined, and at times her narration demonstrates a desire to escape this oppressive positioning. While out one evening with a man she has recently met, Cannie feels embarrassed when she insinuates that she and her new friend Steve are on a date when he replies that they are just friends. Cannie flees the restaurant from a back exit and confesses her frustration with the thin/fat dichotomy:

> Part of me—the reasonable part—was thinking that this was not a big thing, just a minor bump on life's bicycle path, and that he was the idiot, not me. [. . .] I'd had dates before. I'd even had boyfriends. It was completely reasonable to think that I'd have them both again, and this guy wasn't worth another second of my time. But another part—the shrill, hysterical, hypercritical, and unfortunately, much louder part—was saying something else entirely. That I was dumb. That I was fat. That I was so fat that nobody would love me again and so dense that I couldn't see it. That I'd been a fool, or worse, been made a fool of. That Steve, the Teva-wearing engineer, was probably sitting at an empty table, eating calamari and laughing to himself about big, dumb Cannie. (83-84)

The above quotation demonstrates how Cannie desires to evade the category of Woman, as she is aware of her self-worth and a part of her does not believe that she has been rejected based solely on her body's size. Cannie emphasizes masculine and feminine stereotypes as she divides herself into two parts, one which is "rational" (masculine) and the other that is "irrational" (feminine). Her "reasonable" side is self-aware as she attempts to reject the unjust social positioning of her perceived fat body. However, her more "shrill, hysterical, hypercritical" side is the voice of the stereotypical madwoman, convincing her she is fat and therefore worthless. Once she receives a makeover from one of Hollywood's famous stylists, Garth, she is surprised at how beautiful she is, and his efforts, in effect, redo her self-image:

> He'd already brushed three different shades of shadow around my eyes, including one that looked practically violet. But when he whipped the cape off me and twirled me to face the mirror, I felt sorry for even thinking about doubting him. My skin was glowing. My cheeks were the color of a perfect, ripe apricot. My lips were full, a warm wine color, curling with a faint hint of amusement even though I wasn't aware that I was

> smiling. And I didn't notice eyeshadow, just my eyes, which seemed much bigger, much more compelling. I looked like myself, only more so… like the best, most happy version of myself. (256-57)

Garth presents Cannie with the "best" version of herself, a more feminine version, by applying makeup and treating her like a doll. She, in turn, feels like a princess, twirling and glowing before the mirror. With makeup, her cheeks are "perfect," her lips "full," and her overall appearance is "happy." This description of her appearance is very different from the description she provides of herself earlier in the novel where much of her focus is on her masculine appearance and her ever-present double chin. The fruit imagery signals a return to the natural world where Woman exists in the male imaginary, and it also plays with the idea that juicy fruit and wine are part of the sensual world in which the division between consuming food/sex is, indeed, a thin one. As a pregnant woman Cannie seems more feminine, unfazed by her larger body, as none of her self-descriptions even hint at her size. However, even as Cannie seems more comfortable in her pregnant body it is important to her that she be recognized as pregnant and not fat. While shopping for diamond earnings as a reward for selling her screenplay, her friend Maxi remarks: "'You know what?' [. . .] 'I think you look fine. I think you look wonderful. You look happy … and healthy… and, and pregnant…'" (284), to which Cannie responds, "Don't forget that"(284). Her pregnant body is large and therefore beautiful because, as a pregnant woman, she is allowed to be big – she is expected to be big. This self-perception changes after Cannie nearly loses her baby and she seeks Dr. Krushelevansky's help. Once Cannie realizes that she must take care of her body for her baby, she slowly begins to regain her weight, a "[m]uch healthier" disposition, according to Dr. Krushelevansky (359).

Weiner attempts to subvert the notion that thin bodies are desirable bodies, as by the conclusion of the novel Cannie regains her weight; however, this message is contradictory as Cannie is only able to accept her body once she realizes that a new man finds her attractive. Her inevitable engagement to Dr. Krushelevansky at the conclusion of the novel is Cannie's ultimate resolution to her struggle with her fat-girl identity, not to mention her fixation with her father figure. She has successfully secured a boyfriend/husband who is handsome and successful, a kinder version of her father, thereby signalling that her body is finally accepted by a male authority, and as such, she indirectly resolves her issues with her father. Like Maggie and Ronnie, Cannie's self-acceptance is largely due to a positive male influence which authorizes her to accept her body, her self as a woman within a patriarchal sexual economy.

Afterword

Despite Chick Lit's monetary success, the targeting of specific types of women has proven to be limiting as the creation of these albeit varied groupings continue to exclude women on one hand, and oppress others by trying to contain them within a universal definition of what it means to be Woman – a definition feminists have worked painstakingly to escape. The different categories within the sub-genres reinforce conventional feminine stereotypes that are contained within male-dominated discourse. To suggest that there is a novel for every woman contained within Chick Lit and its sub-genres is simply ludicrous, as it ignores and undermines decades of feminist discourses. Unfortunately, this subjection is not solely limited to the literary world. On a daily basis many women are bombarded with images of idealized femininity as presented in the mass media, namely through film and television, and these images construct female desire. Rosalind Coward confirms this notion in her text *Female Desire: Women's Sexuality Today*, wherein she writes:

> Representations of female pleasure and desire [. . .] produc[e] and sustain [. . .] feminine positions. These positions are neither distant roles imposed on us from outside which would be easy to kick off, nor are they the essential attributes of femininity. Feminine positions are produced as response to the pleasure offered to us; our subjectivity and identity are formed in the definitions of desire which encircle us. (16)

Cultural messages inform the female audience that they are capable of having control of their lives if they have the desired appearance, but at what cost? Hopwood writes: "identification with mass-mediated images evokes anxiety rather than pleasure because the messages imply that unless we measure up, we won't be loved and certainly won't qualify for the 'good things in life'" (68). Many women are influenced by diet corporations like Weight Watchers and

SlimFast, as well as by televised makeover programs, for example NBC's *The Biggest Loser* and RDF Media's *How to Look Good Naked*, insomuch as these systems operate as ideologies within our society and work to regulate women's behaviours and ideals.

Cultural critic Stuart Hall defines ideology as "the mental frameworks – the languages, the concepts, categories, imagery of thought, and the systems of representation – which different classes and social groups deploy in order to make sense of, define, figure out and render intelligible the way society works" (26). In a capitalist system, a very small division of the wealthy population maintains shares of corporations. By virtue of their ownership, the capitalists control these industries and the images that they produce. The corporations within the media and diet industries have a shared incentive to promote a philosophy of idealized beauty to the public, such as thin is beautiful. If consumers accept this philosophy, they purchase the diet products and accept the image of beauty that the media projects. Under the pretense of self-help, the diet culture promotes a thin body, while the media simultaneously produces images consistent with thinness and beauty. This creates an agency problem as there is a potential that the capitalists have direct interest in both industries, and/or a mutual interest; by promoting the thin body they both become more profitable, but they can only profit if there continue to be a significant portion of the public, or consumer groups, that need/desire to consume such products. In other words, these industries require fat audiences. The public is caught in a double bind wherein the corporations rely on fat viewers to both purchase their products as well as maintain their audiences.

Chick Lit is a division of media production, and as a result it is subject to the concept of ideal beauty. The plethora of examples throughout Bigger Girl Lit indicates that the narrations are consistent with notions of the diet culture, wherein the protagonists are often on a quest to

reduce their body sizes, reinforcing the message that thin is beautiful. This validation further perpetuates the control of the capitalists and makes Bigger Girl Lit and Chick Lit respectively, subject to capitalist influence. This is extremely troublesome, especially given that within this framework, the capitalist is assumed to be male. This undermines the feminine influence of Chick Lit as it participates in discourse ordered by the phallus.

Televised media operates in a similar fashion whereby it is also male-dominated, which is significant because the media has a male-identified relationship with respect to beauty. This adds a hedonic justification for images in the media that perpetuate thin as beautiful. The consumer who buys into the notion of thinness and beauty is duped into perpetual control under the capitalist bourgeoisie. A critical examination of images of beauty as presented within televised media makeover programs would be useful in examining the ways in which the public, and more specifically women, are subjected to capitalist ideology. However, such a study is beyond the scope of this thesis.

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