

**“NO MATTER WHAT, WE MUST EAT TO LIVE”: FOOD FEELINGS AND
BODY IMAGE IN CONTEMPORARY WOMEN’S LITERATURE IN CANADA**

by

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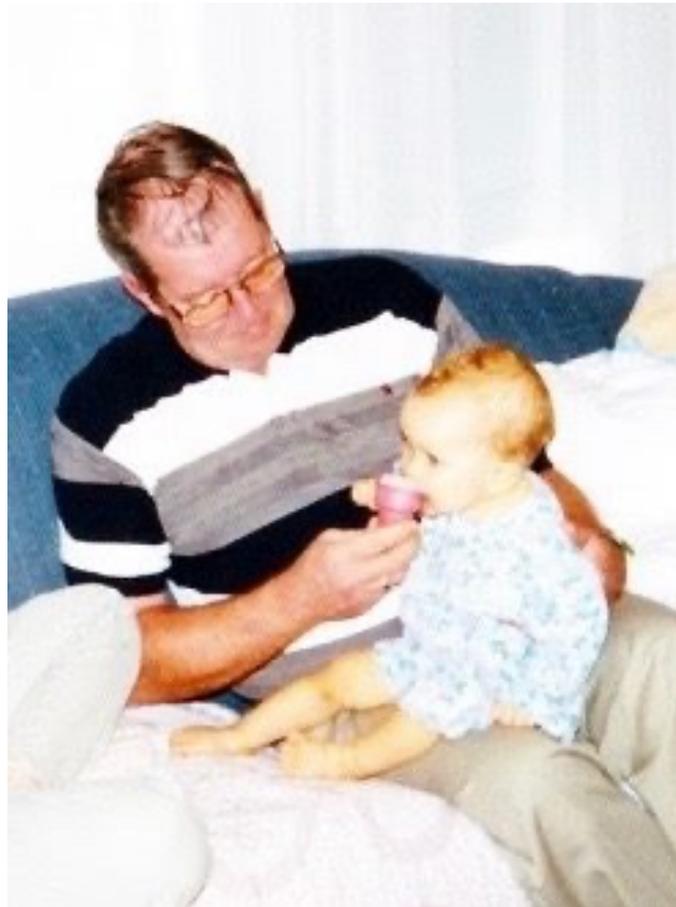
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ABSTRACT

What if loving our bodies was not revolutionary? What if, rather, being happy with our bodies, no matter what they looked like, was the norm? Through its analysis of Saleema Nawaz's *Bone and Bread* (2013), Tracey Lindberg's *Birdie* (2015), and Mona Awad's *13 Ways of Looking at a Fat Girl* (2016), this thesis explores the ways that women authors in Canada write back against diet cultures and body shaming, and, in turn, depict positive and healing relationships between individuals, their bodies, and food. With today's proliferation of technology amongst youth, people as young as elementary school-aged children can access fatphobic messaging through the glorification of thin 'Influencers' on platforms such as Instagram, Netflix, and YouTube. In response to this era of unlimited technological access, this thesis uses these three novels to shift the cultural focus from body- and food-shaming, and to, instead, promote self-acceptance and self-love.

DEDICATION

For my Grampy, Bob Maltby (1947-2016),
who taught me to share every cone of ice cream



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Curriculum Vitae

I like my body best when I am not worried

about how much space it is taking up.

—Sabrina Benaim, *Depression & Other Magic Tricks*

I want a house with a crowded table /

And a place by the fire for everyone

—The Highwomen, “Crowded Table”

INTRODUCTION

In January of 2020, Tim Hortons announced the release of a new line of “Dream Donuts” across the country. That month, my boyfriend, whose latest passion is taste-testing donuts from different bakeries across New Brunswick, bought us a box of six of these new creations—two Dulce de Lèche, two Strawberry Confetti, and two Chocolate Truffle. I never imagined I would find myself sharing six donuts in a food court with someone, and that it would feel easy and normal. Yet, this moment solidified that I have found a person with whom I want to share many more meals, and that I am also at a stage where I feel good about eating—in a public place, no less.

I cannot pinpoint the exact moment when I started feeling negatively about myself, my body, and food. I do, however, have innumerable memories of my classmates making unsolicited comments about my appearance—beginning in elementary school. Recently, I began to wonder why I was never allowed to exist without the commentary of others. Why could I not wear shorts to a school dance without the vice-principal telling me that my body made other people uncomfortable? Why did I wait until I was on the bus and out of sight after school to eat my lunch? Why did I deprive myself of sleep every night just to straighten my naturally-curly hair to the point of frying? All of these moments that felt normal to me as a young child and teenager now seem unfair and unnecessary. However, I have come to realize (after extensive self-reflection and research) that even though my body feels like a project that has never been my own, I benefit from various privileges that so many others do not. I am a thin white woman who grew up with everything that I needed. I am university educated. I have never known

what it feels like to go hungry out of necessity. To this day, I have a kitchen table to come home to. My parents have always shown me that they love me by feeding me. Despite the negative food feelings that I continue to overcome, my access to food has never been compromised. Moreover, I have never faced food-, body-, or race-related discrimination. In other words, nobody makes prejudicial assumptions about me when they see me eating a donut in a food court. Certainly, that this donut was from Tim Hortons makes this moment even more poignant.¹ I embody the quintessential Tim Hortons consumer; I am white, I am straight, and I contribute to a national narrative of Tim Hortons lovers who feel ‘Canadian’ each time they spend their money at one of Canada’s thousands of Tim Hortons locations. I may as well be drinking my “Tim’s” coffee in a cold arena while my white sons play hockey. Therefore, I have been, simultaneously, a victim of and a participant in the same system of body-shaming that benefits people who look like me.

Unfortunately, many white Canadians of the twenty-first century consider body-shaming and the valourization of thinness to be normal. In 2020, not only are we besieged by news articles and images that promote weight-loss, but the rise of Instagram, and also of ‘Influencer’ culture and internet marketing, has led to the accessibility of fatphobic messages from our phones at any moment. It seems as if there are more detox teas, weight-loss and fitness programs, and specialized diets than ever before. With our technologically-advanced youth, even children can access this messaging daily through

¹ As Patricia Cormack and James F. Cosgrave argue in *Desiring Canada: CBC Contests, Hockey Violence and Other Stately Pleasures*, “Tim Hortons has increasingly marketed itself as the cultural site for the articulation of Canadian values” (62). Tim Hortons emblemizes the misleading and exclusionary narrative of Canadian unity and friendliness.

the celebration of thin and fit ‘Influencers’ on platforms like Instagram, Netflix, YouTube, and TikTok. Frighteningly, social media has accelerated the phenomenon of body commentary. We can see snapshots of each other’s lives, and we have the option to make online comments, share posts, and indicate whether or not we ‘like’ photos and videos of other people. As a result, individuals feel even more entitled than before to making comments about the bodies of others. Kids also have the technology and means to participate in this discourse online. Because of this, teaching young people to love and accept their bodies rather than manipulate them (like I once did in school) is imperative. Yet, this begs the question: what if loving our bodies was not revolutionary? What if, instead, being happy with our bodies, no matter what they looked like, was the norm?

The answers to these questions, I suggest, can be found in select contemporary fiction written by women. My thesis contends that three texts by women writers in Canada from marginalized communities—Mona Awad’s *13 Ways of Looking at a Fat Girl* (2016), Saleema Nawaz’s *Bone and Bread* (2013), and Tracey Lindberg’s *Birdie* (2015)—undermine popular assumptions of beauty and dieting by exploring food feelings and disordered eating habits. There has been very little critical engagement with these novels. However, I use them to subvert hegemonic and dangerous narratives circulated through pro-diet rhetoric. While North American cultures reject eating disorders as ‘abject’ and degraded, they applaud people who participate in fad-diets such as “clean eating,” the “keto diet,” and veganism for being ‘disciplined,’ ‘healthy,’ and ‘beautiful.’ Moreover, this pro-diet rhetoric perpetuates fatphobia and, in turn, upholds false

equations between ‘weight’ and ‘health.’² Such discourse encourages cultures of body and food shaming that, in turn, perpetuate disordered eating and leave people feeling grotesque—that is, distorted, unnatural, and disfigured. As Susan Bordo posits, eating disorders “call our attention to [...] our historical heritage of disdain for the [woman’s] body, [...] [and the] disquieting meaning of contemporary beauty ideals” (*Unbearable Weight* 139-40). I assert that these three women authors reclaim the body from diet cultures. Through their women-identifying characters, Awad, Nawaz, and Lindberg all emphasize the possibility and importance of positive food feelings.

In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Sara Ahmed highlights that emotionality and feeling have historically been viewed as feminine characteristics, while the faculties of reason and thought have been associated with masculinity. By minimizing emotions and feelings in relation to rationality, western culture has trivialized women’s concerns and livelihoods:

To be emotional is to have one’s judgement affected: it is to be reactive rather than active, dependent rather than autonomous. Feminist philosophers have shown us how the subordination of emotions also works to subordinate the feminine and the body [...]. Emotions are associated with women, who are represented as ‘closer’ to nature, ruled by appetite, and less able to transcend the body through thought, will and judgement. (Ahmed 3)

² Weight-loss advocates regularly blame fat people for their health problems. Deb Burgard critiques the ways in which pro-dieting rhetoric links ‘weight’ and ‘health’ in her article “What is ‘Health at Every Size?’”: “91% of what accounts for health outcome has *nothing to do with BMI*. [Health at Every Size] practitioners advocate putting more effort into explaining the factors making up that 91% not related to weight” (43). In other words, weight-loss advocates claiming to be “health conscious” merely perpetuate fatphobia, and disseminate inaccurate and prejudicial information about weight.

However, as Ahmed suggests, human emotions actually allow us to distinguish between ourselves and the outside world; they draw the boundary between ‘inside’ and ‘outside,’ and ‘self’ and ‘other.’ We do not merely have emotions. Instead, they are the means through which we understand ourselves and our surroundings: “It is through emotions, or how we respond to objects and others, that surfaces or boundaries are made: the ‘I’ and the ‘we’ are shaped by, and even take the shape of, contact with others” (Ahmed 10). We come to understand our bodies through these distinctions, as “bodies take the shape of the very contact they have with objects and others” (Ahmed 1). How we feel about things and people shapes our interactions with them: “Emotions shape the very surfaces of bodies, which take shape through the repetition of actions over time, as well as through orientations towards and away from others” (Ahmed 4). If we feel negatively towards things or people, we will avoid them; in the same vein, when we feel positively towards entities, we seek them out. These emotions and the interactions that they produce are identity-forming. In other words, how we feel about the world around us reflects how we feel about ourselves.

However, as Bordo articulates in *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*, “Women, as study after study has shown, do *not* feel very good about their bodies” (Bordo 57). Certainly, people do not always feel good about food either. While the rapidly-advancing age of social media has provided a platform and visibility for various minorities, it has also fuelled a discourse of body-shaming, fatphobia, and food-fearing. From our devices, we can access weight-loss programs and images of ‘beauty’ wherever and whenever we want; moreover, through photo-sharing platforms, we can

easily and quickly compare our bodies to those of others. In her article “Fat, Syn, and Disordered Eating: The Dangers and Powers of Excess,” Hannah Bacon elucidates that weight-loss programs and diet cultures affect how people feel about consumption through the arbitrary and shame-inducing coding of certain foods as “good” and “bad.” Bacon asserts that this discourse discourages food-related pleasure; it recycles harmful rhetoric from the Christians and Greeks who “considered that eating for pleasure identified human beings with irrationality and with animals” (Bacon 12). In western contexts, feeling positively about food is not a priority. We are not supposed to feel enjoyment or happiness from the food itself when we consume it; rather, we should feel happiness (or shame) because of what the food does to our physical bodies. This discourse tells us that feelings are only important after we eat, and not during the process of eating itself. In 2009, *Women’s Wear Daily* asked Kate Moss if she had any mottos for her life, and she replied that “Nothing tastes as good as skinny feels.” Moss has since retracted that statement, but, in 2020, the sentiment still stands. Thinness brings happiness; it is, what Sara Ahmed calls in *The Promise of Happiness*, a “happy object”: “We turn toward objects at the very point of ‘making.’ To be made ‘happy’ by this or that is to recognize that happiness starts from somewhere other than the subject. [...] If happiness creates its objects, then such objects are passed around, accumulating positive affective value as social goods” (Ahmed 21). Because thinness is a happy object, we should do whatever it takes to reach it—even if it means we hate our food and ourselves.

Ahmed suggests that, while everyone appears to seek ‘happiness’ and the ‘good life,’ the word ‘happiness’ itself is empty. While “the science of happiness presumes that

happiness is ‘out there,’ that you can measure happiness and that these measurements are objective,” (Ahmed 5) happiness is subjective and arbitrary. What brings happiness to one person may not bring happiness to another. As a consequence, by seeking an eternal state of ‘happiness,’ we may be overlooking, or even avoiding, objective things or people that actually provoke measurable positive feelings. We are taught to keep our eye on the satisfaction that may (or may not) come with thinness, rather than really enjoy the donut in front of us. Ahmed suggests that, when we long for happiness, we do not even know if the end result of our quest will bring us joy: “If happiness is what we wish for, it does not mean we know what we wish for in wishing for happiness. Happiness might even conjure its own wish. Or happiness might keep its place as a wish by its failure to be given” (Ahmed 1). When we wish for happiness, we equate this goal of fulfillment with certain entities, such as thinness. Therefore, when we want to associate with happiness, we want to be associated with its surrounding objects: “The very promise that happiness is what you get for having the right associations might be how we are directed towards certain things” (Ahmed 2). The connections we make between happiness and things (such as thinness) can actually cause damage and harm to people with different views of what happiness entails. For example, Ahmed praises the feminist, Black, and queer communities for critiquing the ‘happiness’ perpetuated through images such as ‘the happy housewife,’ ‘the happy slave,’ and ‘domestic bliss’: “scholarship and activism [...] expose the unhappy effects of happiness, teaching us how happiness is used to redescribe social norms as social goods” (Ahmed 2). Therefore, what damage do we cause when we

seek happiness through thinness? What harmful messages are we perpetuating in doing so?

Nevertheless, as Ahmed argues, we seek happiness because we want to feel 'good.' However, our beliefs surrounding what we think will make us feel 'good' or 'bad' depend on pre-made distinctions of what it means to feel positively or negatively about something or someone. In other words, the happiness of others determines our own sense of happiness:

It matters how we think about feeling. Much of the new science of happiness is premised on the model of feelings as transparent, as well as the foundation for moral life. If something is good, we feel good. If something is bad, we feel bad. The science of happiness thus relies on a very specific model of subjectivity, where one knows how one feels, and where the distinction between good and bad feelings is secure, forming the basis of subjective as well as social well-being. (Ahmed 6)

So, when Instagrammers, TikTok video makers, and Youtube fitness gurus claim that happiness comes from attaining a fit and thin body, then their audiences might also associate their own happiness with these same goals. Yet, as novelists Awad, Nawaz, and Lindberg all demonstrate through their protagonists, thinness may provide people with social acceptance, but it may not actually bring contentment. In fact, several of the characters in these books who are skinny (such as Awad's Lizzie; Nawaz's Sadhana; and Lindberg's Birdie, Maggie, and Skinny Freda) actually undergo immense suffering and inner turmoil. Moreover, while they grapple with and struggle against idealized images of 'beauty' and gender, many of the women of diverse backgrounds in these books also face mental health struggles. The three novels under investigation probe whether thinness actually brings happiness, or if it, instead, brings privilege. Of course, these two benefits

are not mutually exclusive. However, when we assume that the privilege of thinness automatically brings happiness, we falsely assume that all people who are ‘thin’ are happy. Perhaps more insidiously, this discourse also claims that people who do not meet the thin, white, and feminine ideal are unhappy. In associating thinness with happiness, are we establishing a social norm that implies people who are not thin or white do not deserve to be happy?

Awad, Nawaz, and Lindberg all grapple with dominant images of ‘beauty’ in their fiction. I assert that, rather than perpetuate a western idolization of thinness and whiteness, these authors each portray realistic depictions of women’s troubled relationships with food and their bodies. All three texts are directed toward adult audiences, but they each trace unhealthy childhood relationships with food that persist into womanhood. Rather than presenting their readers with perfectly harmonious endings, these novelists subvert the traditional bildungsroman³ trajectory, and demonstrate that the implications of diet cultures remain strong in adulthood. These texts also expose the toxicity of dominant images of white, slim, and feminine beauty and conformity, and how women regain control in this system by becoming invisible (through literally shrinking and ultimately destroying their bodies). Peggy Phelan argues that, “The binary between the power of visibility and invisibility is falsifying. There is real power in remaining unmarked; and there are serious limitations to visual representation” (6). Moreover, as

³ The *OED Online* defines a “bildungsroman” as “a novel that has as its main theme the formative years or spiritual education of one person” (*OED* 1989). While bildungsroman trajectories usually follow the psychological and moral growth of their protagonists into adulthood, Awad, Nawaz, and Lindberg subvert this journey, as their characters all continue to face food- and body-related hurdles in their adult years.

Phelan articulates, women-identifying individuals resist men's constructions of (un)desirability by taking control of their own (in)visibility. I extend this theory of performance to the study of eating disorders and negative relationships with food. In these novels, having control over one's own (in)visibility provides women-identifying characters with agency and a sense of security from the pervasive and invasive judgment of the outside world on the bodies of others.

Yet, as Awad, Nawaz, and Lindberg's protagonists highlight, while the manipulation of and agency over one's own body can provide a sense of control, it may not bring happiness. Instead, as these characters of diverse backgrounds come to realize, reclaiming and reshaping one's own relationship to food itself can be an incredibly healing and positive experience. These three writers suggest that food is not the means to the end goal of 'thinness'; rather, food is our beginning, our middle, and end. It is a part of the entire life journey. We cannot survive without consuming food; by embracing it as our life force, we can find immense pleasure, contentment, and peace. As Muscogee poet Joy Harjo writes in her poem "Perhaps the World Ends Here," "No matter what, we must eat to live" (Harjo 1994). While dieting discourse positions 'happiness' as a distant destination that we can only reach through the achievement of thinness, Awad, Nawaz, and Lindberg articulate that 'happiness' is a present and attainable mood that we feel when we eat good food and share meals with those we love. These authors highlight negative food feelings while, simultaneously, presenting positive food feelings through healing environments, community, and shared consumption. Food feelings do not need to

be bad. Instead, they can bring people closer to the feeling of ‘happiness’ than diet cultures would suggest.

Even so, in her 2016 novel *13 Ways of Looking at a Fat Girl*, Mona Awad highlights how contemporary dieting cultures and fatphobia make negative food feelings seem inescapable. Awad’s *13 Ways* chronicles the life of Lizzie (also known as Beth and Elizabeth)—a woman of colour with Indian heritage from Mississauga, Ontario. In 13 chapters, which read like individualized short stories, Awad progressively traces Lizzie’s life—from her childhood, to her teenaged years, and then to her time as a young woman. In each chapter, however, is one major running theme: Lizzie feels horribly about the way that she looks. Lizzie is ashamed of her fatness, and she convinces herself that thinness will bring her happiness. She focuses her attention on becoming attractive to others; she dates older men in online chat rooms, takes provocative pictures for said men, and mimics the makeup and outfits of her skinnier friends. However, as a young adult, when she discovers that dressing herself up cannot fully mask her body, she dedicates her life to losing weight. In an attempt to master ‘self-control,’ Lizzie meticulously counts calories, exercises relentlessly, and obsessively logs her weight. During her weight loss, rather than becoming happier, Lizzie develops disordered eating habits, and struggles with the inability to connect on a deep and meaningful level with those around her. Through her efforts to battle fatness, Lizzie not only competes against other thin and fat women, but also creates a vicious cycle of self-destructive behaviour that is paradoxically isolating—leaving her feeling entirely alone in her negative body-image.

While dieting cultures single people out as ‘Other’ in order to make them feel different and lonesome, negative food feelings and body-image are actually remarkably common. Notably, Awad intentionally leaves out specific numeric details about Lizzie’s weight, as she claims that many people can relate to Lizzie’s negative relationship with her own self. However, as a fat woman and also a woman of colour, Lizzie faces particular challenges in a system that prioritizes and over-represents white, thin, and fit bodies. Because of her body, Lizzie always feels as if she stands out from the crowd. While Awad’s details surrounding Lizzie’s ethnicity are just as sparse as specific references to weight, Awad tells readers that Lizzie’s looks, like her mother’s, favour their Indian heritage. Moreover, as Lizzie’s largely-absentee father harshly points out, Lizzie and her mother are both fat. As a consequence, Lizzie struggles against fatphobic social inequalities, such as the inability to purchase clothing deemed ‘fashionable’ or ‘attractive’ in western culture. For example, when Lizzie tries on dresses in a clothing store fitting room, the store attendant dismisses Lizzie’s fashion requests and tastes—as if a fat woman searching for a fancy dress has ‘unreasonable’ expectations. Because social judgment surrounding fatness causes Lizzie daily turmoil, she seeks thinness as a ‘solution’ to her unhappiness.

However, Awad asserts that, while thinness may bring privilege, it does not necessarily lead to the ‘happiness’ so commonly portrayed in popular culture and media. In the same vein, rather than bringing her joy, Lizzie’s new thin, fit, and toned body comes with a great deal of sadness and loss. Though she receives praise from family and friends for her new thin physique and self-control, Lizzie feels more alone than ever.

Upon dedicating her life to exercise and bland health food, Lizzie emotionally disconnects from all of her loved ones—including her husband, Tom. Though they once were romantic and affectionate, Lizzie and Tom are now awkward. They do not find closeness through food anymore; they no longer share dinner at the table, as Lizzie refuses to eat the foods that make Tom happy, and, at the same time, Tom is disgusted by the foods that Lizzie believes to be healthy. Even date nights now cause heartache, as Lizzie's 'cheat meals' trigger negative food feelings, reinforce self-blame, and worsen her disordered eating habits. Lizzie so deeply internalizes fatphobic discrimination that she becomes her own worst critic. Because she focuses her energy on maintaining her thin body, once important relationships, such as that with her husband, fall apart. Only years later, when Lizzie finds herself living alone as a divorced woman in an apartment complex connected to a busy fitness centre, does she finally begin to discover the trap that is the pursuit of thinness. As Lizzie watches other women on fitness machines act like "Rodentia" (Awad 193) in a race towards thinness, Lizzie becomes aware of her own participation in fatphobic systems. Offering a bleaker outlook than Nawaz's *Bone and Bread* and Lindberg's *Birdie*, Awad's *13 Ways* suggests that food feelings, whether positive or negative, are permeated by the cultural discourse of diet cultures and the coding of 'healthy' and 'unhealthy' foods. Because the inescapability of bodily judgment is heightened in a social media driven world, perhaps having a conscious awareness of our own food feelings and motivations is the best that humans of the twenty-first century can do.

Conversely, in Saleema Nawaz's 2013 novel *Bone and Bread*, mixed-race sisters Beena and Sadhana try to make sense of their relationships with each other and their own food feelings after the deaths of their parents. After being orphaned as teenagers, the sisters are raised by their Sikh uncle, who runs a bagel shop in Montreal's Mile End. The story is told from Beena's point of view, and the narration jumps back and forth between various periods in the sisters' lives. At the novel's opening, readers learn that Sadhana is dead, and in order to heal, Beena recounts, digests, and processes the traumatic events of their lives that occurred while Sadhana was still alive. While Beena and Sadhana are young girls, their Sikh father dies of a heart attack in the family-owned bagel shop. When they are teenagers, their white mother dies choking on chicken that her daughters cooked for her. Unsurprisingly, these heart-wrenching moments permanently alter Beena and Sadhana's relationships with food—as can be gleaned from the title of Nawaz's novel itself. The sisters follow diverging paths in relation to their trauma; while Sadhana develops anorexia and turns to “Bone,” Beena gains weight like rising and expanding “Bread,” and eventually becomes pregnant. The relationship between the sisters is fraught; they resent each other for the deaths of their parents. Beena feels forced into mothering her sister who suffers from mental illness, and Sadhana loathes Beena's infantilizing and pervasive judgment. Moreover, as women of mixed Sikh and European heritage, the sisters deal with racist commentary on their appearances, and outright acts of terrorism on the family bagel shop and their apartment just above it. Throughout *Bone and Bread*, Nawaz demonstrates that the body is shaped by food feelings; it is a material

manifestation of intergenerational trauma, personal hardships, and socio-economic positions.

Sadhana and Beena's relationship to food and the maintenance of their bodies visibly deteriorates when they are orphaned. During Beena and Sadhana's childhood, their Mama and Papa teach the sisters to view food as not only nourishment, but also as a channel through which people can bond, heal, and find comfort. In particular, Mama suggests that food is the most basic reason that one should be joyful to be alive. She cooks elaborate dishes, bakes delicious desserts, takes frequent trips to the local market, and values shared meals at the family kitchen table. Similarly, Papa embodies a love for food as a vessel for emotional growth. Not only does he work hard to feed his family and community in the bagel shop, but he also establishes the family tradition of taking *hukams*—reading holy passages to set the tone for the day—after breakfast at the table. When their parents die, however, Beena and Sadhana cannot digest this loss, and their relationship with food is altered negatively. Sadhana avoids eating altogether; food repulses and frightens her. While Sadhana's anorexia may not be directly fuelled by a pursuit of thinness, her perception of her sister, Beena, is mired in fatphobia and judgment. Sadhana cannot comprehend Beena's ability to parent a child and be happy while, simultaneously, being fat. Ironically, though Beena's constant surveillance of her sister's eating habits may be exasperating for Sadhana, Sadhana also analyzes and critiques her sister's dieting choices and the ways in which Beena chooses to feed her son. At the time that Sadhana suddenly dies from a heart attack as a result of her eating disorder, the relationship of the two sisters remains strained.

However, after Sadhana's death, Beena seeks to restore her family's once positive relationship with food, and establish new and joyful food feelings with her son, Quinn. Notably, Nawaz closes her novel with Beena, Quinn, and Quinn's girlfriend, Caro, sharing food around a stranger's kitchen table and forming new, healthy bonds. Beena echoes her late mother, and she suggests that food is the essence of her new life path: "We are eating together and we are alive" (Nawaz 445). In this kitchen moment, Beena recalls her childhood, and she chooses to appreciate food in a way that Sadhana always wanted to but was never able to accomplish. With these actions, Beena begins to heal herself, and also takes on the healing of her past and present family unit. She also becomes a new, productive stand-in for Mama, and she dedicates herself to "the work of a whole life" (Nawaz 445) of caring for and nourishing her new interpretation of family. Through her sister's death, and her digestion of this loss, Beena discovers that food does not need to sever connections. Food can be the glue that brings people together, and the vessel that carries them forward past hardships.

Alternatively, in her 2015 novel *Birdie*, Cree author and academic Tracey Lindberg resists white Canadian discourses of 'health' and 'wellness,' and instead focuses on Indigenous conceptions of physical, emotional, and spiritual wellbeing. *Birdie* follows the story of Bernice "Birdie" Meetoos—a Cree woman who lives just outside of Little Loon First Nation in Northern Alberta. Tracing Birdie's life from childhood into womanhood, *Birdie* jumps back and forth in time; these shifts demonstrate how Birdie's past trauma and experiences continue to influence her present life and wellbeing. Seeking to escape her pain and suffering as a result of familial abuse, Bernice leaves her home in

Alberta, and ends up at a bakery owned by a white woman named Lola in Gibsons, British Columbia, where Birdie undergoes a second, more spiritual journey. Birdie stays in bed in her room above the bakeshop for a week; while her physical body remains in her bed, her spiritual self enters a dreamstate. Birdie comes to understand her past and her present through the visions that appear in her dreams. While Birdie's physical journey out of harm's way in Alberta is significant, Lindberg highlights that Birdie's spiritual journey is just as important and transformative. As a fat Indigenous woman, Birdie faces social and familial abuses; because of stigma surrounding her appearance and diet, Birdie is the object of ridicule and harm from both inside and outside of her family unit. Through her internalized and self-directed journey in Gibsons, Bernice leaves and returns to her body in order to find peace with herself and her past experiences.

Lindberg uses Birdie's character to humanize the particular experiences of Indigenous women that predominantly white Canadians fail to 'connect' with for a variety of reasons. As Lindberg suggests, not only are Indigenous women usually portrayed negatively in the media, but they also struggle against racist and sexist images of the "Indian Princess," such as Sacajawea and Pocahontas. Gail Guthrie Valaskasis argues that "Indian princesses [are] constructed to accommodate colonial experience, western expansion, and national formations" (131). Yet Lindberg resists such portrayals of Indigenous women. In a 2015 interview with Emily M. Keeler for *National Post*, Lindberg suggests that non-indigenous Canadians need to begin viewing Indigenous people in Canada as their relatives and equals. Lindberg aims to make this message known and accessible to a wide audience through *Birdie*:

“It’s really difficult to dismiss or dehumanize indigenous peoples if it’s a person,” Lindberg says. “So what I hope that the book does — that good stuff — is to humanize us, humanize indigenous woman [sic], indigenous girls, so that, in a way, we’re thought of as relatives. Because you care about your relatives,” she says. “You don’t let your relatives get murdered or go missing.” (Keeler quoting Lindberg)

This notion of relativity, Lindberg asserts, hearkens back to Cree law. Unlike the settler-Canadian justice system, which focuses on the individual as a perpetrator and criminal, Cree law is grounded in the principle of reciprocity. All beings are related and interconnected, and they have a responsibility to respect and care for one another: “Cree law, Lindberg says, is relational—one very important tenet is that all human beings treat each other like relatives, that we have a reciprocal obligation to take care of one another as if we were universally bound by family ties” (Keeler quoting Lindberg). Indeed, Lindberg’s *Birdie* enacts these relations, and demonstrates the healing and that takes place when such connections are formed and prioritized by non-Indigenous and Indigenous peoples in Canada. Moreover, the specificity of Birdie’s story and experiences makes Lindberg’s *Birdie* humanizing. The story not only humanizes its various characters, but it, like other stories, Lindberg suggests, facilitates the healing that can and must take place on a personal level.

Lindberg emphasizes that Birdie’s own personal healing comes from her reclamation of Cree conceptions of wellbeing and health. Unlike western ‘health,’ which focuses on the physical body, Cree interpretations of wellness, like Cree law, are more relative and holistic. Similarly, Birdie is ‘healthy’ when she and those around her are physically, emotionally, and spiritually at peace. After a lifetime of ridicule and abuse

from her uncles, her classmates, and the general public, Birdie decides to redefine herself and her body by embracing her existence as a Cree woman. In her dreamstate, she compiles long grocery lists of both traditional and western foods; when she wakes, these become the ingredients that she uses while cooking with her “woman family” (Lindberg 245). While the kitchen was once a place of oppression and danger for Birdie, it is now a place of reconstruction, nourishment, and mutual healing. As she and her “madefamily” (Lindberg 245)—Auntie Val, Skinny Freda, and Lola—prepare food for a tree healing ceremony, Birdie reclaims her place in these food environments, and she highlights how important it is for all individuals to feel as if they are welcome in the kitchen and at the table. The sharing of food amongst relatives does not negate familial abuse, nor can it erase systemic racism and inequalities against Indigenous women, girls, and children in Canada. However, as Lindberg proposes, these dinner tables, and the conversations they foster, not only normalize different body types, but they also promote positive food feelings and relationships.

While diet cultures dictate the importance of ‘what’ and ‘how’ one eats, these three novels demonstrate that the feelings surrounding food are just as valuable as the food itself. Awad, Nawaz, and Lindberg each discredit white, western constructions of thin ‘happiness’ in their own ways; instead, these authors highlight more immediate forms of ‘happiness’ and enjoyment that can come from eating and sharing food, rather than merely viewing food as a means to thinness. Because they deal directly with race, and focus on positive food feelings shared by marginalized people in Canada, Awad, Nawaz, and Lindberg provide space for underrepresented voices and body types.

Undoubtedly, contemporary and western discussions of ‘health’ and ‘wellness’ focus on what foods are ‘best’ for white and thin bodies, and, therefore, leave out a significant portion of Canada’s population. In the same vein, Awad, Nawaz, and Lindberg’s protagonists do not feel represented in narratives of white Canadian ‘beauty.’ For Awad’s Lizzie, being desirable means that she not only has to fit into tiny dresses, but it also means that she has to mimic the style of white models—such as the pin-up icon Bettie Page. Likewise, Nawaz’s Beena and Sadhana know that, despite having a white mother, their European ancestry cannot be seen on their bodies; instead, as they and the people around them note, they favour their father’s Sikh heritage. Lindberg’s Birdie also struggles to understand herself and her body in relation to sexualized images of both white and Indigenous women. In both cases, Birdie feels as if she does not—and cannot—represent the constructions of ‘beauty’ that are expected of women in Canada.

In her article “Feminist Killjoys (And Other Willful Subjects),” Sara Ahmed writes that the privilege of representation can be understood through the metaphor of a ‘table.’ As she explains, if you have a seat at the table, you are represented, and you get to experience ‘happiness.’ However, if there is no space at the table for you, you do not get to reap the benefits that it provides:

To be unseated by the table of happiness might be to threaten not simply that table, but what gathers around it, what gathers on it. When you are unseated, you can even get in the way of those who are seated, those who want more than anything to keep their seats. To threaten the loss of the seat can be to kill the joy of the seated. (Ahmed 2)

Because dieting cultures associate ‘happiness’ with thinness, anything and everything must be done to maintain this body type and keep a seat at the table. If you lose your seat

(i.e.: if you do not fit this restrictive mold), then you lose the privileges that come along with this space. Furthermore, individuals who discredit this narrative of ‘happiness’ are not welcomed at the table. They inconvenience the seated, not only because they threaten to take up space, but they also suggest alternative forms of living and ‘happiness’ that can upend the entire system altogether.

Awad, Nawaz, and Lindberg all raise fundamental questions about dominant narratives of thin ‘happiness’ and the impediments that this discourse poses to people who do not fit traditional models of white western beauty. While Awad’s book is especially bleak, with Lizzie only just beginning to reach food-related self-awareness at the end of the text, Nawaz and Lindberg both reclaim food spaces and use these environments to portray positive and communal food feelings. As Ahmed’s table metaphor illustrates, both Nawaz and Lindberg imagine new ‘tables’ that provide space for everybody:

Willfulness is a collecting together, of those struggling for a different ground for existence. You need to be supported when you are not going the way things are flowing. [...] Tables give support to gatherings, and we need support when we live our lives in ways that are experienced by others as stubborn or obstinate. (Ahmed 5)

For Nawaz’s Beena, this new table holds seats for people of all backgrounds—including immigrants, activists, and new family members who are not related by blood. Moreover, this kitchen space reshapes the notion of family, with this new unit being founded upon the sharing of food. Similarly, for Lindberg’s women characters, spaces such as the bakery, the kitchen, and the dining table are welcoming spaces where individuals can process trauma, and also come together to move forward. Birdie and her new woman

family prepare dishes and feed others in order to form new bonds amongst Indigenous people, and also between Indigenous and non-indigenous individuals in Canada.

Conversely, while Awad's *Lizzie* longs to share these food spaces with loved ones, these relationships have not yet materialized. Nevertheless, Awad, Nawaz, and Lindberg each emphasize that the 'happiness' offered by diet cultures is misleading and unattainable for innumerable people in Canada; instead, these writers suggest that positive food feelings are possible, productive, and can provide fulfilling and joyful experiences.

Moving forward, I choose to cultivate these same feelings of food joy. As a consequence, my thesis explores how women authors in Canada write back against diet cultures and body shaming, and, in turn, depict positive and healing relationships between individuals, their bodies, and food. In response to this era of unlimited technological access, this thesis uses these three novels to shift the cultural focus from body- and food-shaming, and to, instead, promote self-acceptance and self-love. As I have discovered through my own journey, and by reading the stories of characters such as Awad's *Lizzie*, Nawaz's *Beena and Sadhana*, and Lindberg's *Birdie*, thinness does not bring me happiness; sharing food with the people that I love does. I am also aware that, at the same time, because of my thinness, whiteness, and able-bodied privilege, I occupy various places; even while dieting cultures crush my spirit, I also benefit from having seats at very privileged tables. Both of these experiences are real. Moreover, they push me to dig deeper into my feelings about food and my body, and discover what my own self-judgment implies about bodies that are different from my own. The work of moving past my own body image issues encompasses more than an effort of realizing what tables

welcome me. Rather, this work highlights the importance of welcoming others around my own table, and also of giving up a seat that is not mine to occupy.

CHAPTER 1: The Privilege of Taking up Space: Policing Unruly Bodies in Mona Awad's *13 Ways of Looking at a Fat Girl*

In a 2016 interview for *The Globe and Mail*, “I was interested in exploring a kind of monstrosity,” Mona Awad implies that fatphobic people and cultures endanger and dehumanize others by pitting humans against each other in a never-ending and vicious competition. Awad explores these same themes in her 2016 novel, *13 Ways of Looking at a Fat Girl*. In a response to the question, “Who’s your favourite villain in literature?” Awad reveals that she drew inspiration from the character of Patrick Bateman in Bret Easton Ellis’s *American Psycho*, and highlights his surprising influence on the creation of Lizzie, the protagonist in Awad’s *13 Ways*:

I think it’s a brilliant, very disturbing and complicated portrait of a monster who is at the same time a product of his culture and his age. [...] Certainly Lizzie is no Patrick Bateman, but [...] I was interested in exploring a kind of monstrosity, a psychosis⁴ that our body-image-obsessed culture can bring out in us. (*Globe and Mail* 2016)

As Awad articulates, unlike Ellis’ Patrick Bateman, Lizzie (also known as Beth and Elizabeth) assuredly does not commit violent crimes, nor does she possess white-male

⁴ While Awad refers to this pursuit as a “psychosis,” I favour the term “obsession” to avoid appropriating languages of mental illness.

privilege. However, as a Canadian woman of colour⁵ in a culture of body and food shaming, Lizzie becomes obsessed with achieving, maintaining, and upholding pervasive western ideals of slim and taut beauty. In thirteen poignant chapters, Awad chronicles Lizzie's life and her negative body image in short story-like snapshots. Readers learn that the roots of Lizzie's internalized fatphobia took hold in her childhood and teenaged years; readers also witness her journey through young adulthood into becoming a grown woman entirely devoid of self-love. As BuzzFeed Australia editor Jenna Guillaume articulates, "To be a fat woman in a society that wants women to take up as little space as possible can at times feel like the ultimate transgression" (Guillaume 2018). Similarly, Lizzie seeks happiness and social acceptance through thinness. As this chapter argues, through Lizzie's character, Mona Awad's *13 Ways of Looking at a Fat Girl* presents a comprehensive case study on the centrality and inescapability of negative body-image and fatphobia to an individual's livelihood and experiences; not only do diet cultures teach individuals to judge each other's bodies for taking up space, but they also push their victims to monitor their own appearances at all times.

⁵ As indicated by the summary for Awad's novel, Lizzie grows up "in the suburban hell of Misery Saga (a.k.a. Mississauga)" (Awad, synopsis). Because of the suburbanization of Toronto, Mississauga is distinct from the Toronto area, and is also quite culturally diverse. In "The City-Suburban Cleavage in Canadian Federal Politics," R. Alan Walks indicates that this city-suburban divide can be seen through "differences in voting behaviour, political attitudes and values" (Walks 383). Moreover, as stated in *World Population Review*, the Mississauga Census Profile of 2016 highlights that "Just under 50% of the population of the city have a white ethnic background and just over 20% are from Southern Indian heritage. The next two largest ethnic groups are Chinese and Black. Over half of the people of Mississauga have a native language which is not English" (*World Population Review* 2020).

Book reviewers and mainstream media have paid *13 Ways of Looking at a Fat Girl* considerable attention; to date, however, no scholar has analyzed Awad's book. Despite this lack of scholarly interaction with Awad's text, *13 Ways* and its protagonist, Lizzie, can be read as exploring the oppressive nature of fatphobic and misogynistic discourses that circulate in North American cultures. In her review of *13 Ways* for *The Globe and Mail*, Stacey May Fowles applauds Awad's humanizing, yet gruesome portrayal of cultural fatphobia and women's⁶ conflict:

13 Ways' overall message [is] that the cultural demands on women to conform to a certain size are not only largely unachievable, but destined to leave them distracted, weak and miserable. Further, the necessity of thinness inevitably pits women against each other, forces them into isolation and makes them feel deeply lonely. With admirable nuance and obvious skill, Awad critiques this damaging world we've created for ourselves simply by showing it to us. (2016)

Filled with scenes depicting starving women, predatory men, and individuals of all genders and backgrounds obsessed with their appearances, *13 Ways* suggests that fatphobia does not exist without actors. Instead, Awad depicts how the celebration of thinness permeates all social structures and relationships in order to keep people miserable and 'self-controlled.' Awad, in particular, demonstrates that women-identifying individuals determine their worth in a culture that judges their clothing size, and that this self-hatred is internalized over time. Through Lizzie's story, readers become acutely aware of this extensive system of body-image obsession cultivated through popular media such as social media, literature, magazines and news outlets, television, film, and music. The novel demonstrates that we maintain and uphold this discourse through our

⁶ While Awad's text highlights how people of different genders exist within diet cultures, Awad focuses her narrative on the experiences of individuals who identify as women.

daily social interactions and relationships. In addition, Awad draws attention to the exclusivity of these social and beauty ‘norms.’ As her diverse characters reveal, being able to adhere to western beauty standards requires class privilege and steady income. This affluence not only allows for the luxury of choosing starvation (rather than forced starvation), but also for income that can be dispensed on gym memberships, designer activewear, and expensive fad diets. Establishing a scholarly interaction with Awad’s *13 Ways* allows readers to move beyond merely theorizing negative self-image as a peripheral experience. I use *13 Ways* to argue that these forces are omnipresent and permeate human existence at a wider scale than previously thought.

Before proceeding to Awad’s novel, I must review pop-cultural messaging to demonstrate the stakes of this analysis. The rise of Instagram, and also an ‘Influencer’ culture and its marketing, has led to the accessibility of fatphobic messages directly from our handheld devices. More alarmingly, because youth have access to this technology, people as young as elementary school-aged children can access this messaging through the glorification of thin celebrities on the internet. For example, a rise in online fitness and health programs has, paradoxically, led to the recycling of conventional discourses

that falsely equate weight with health.⁷ Toned and fit bodies are currently “in,” and, as a consequence, we can now see a massive rise in fitness-wear brands in “Instagram-worthy” colours, fabrics, and cuts. Notably, while promoting messages of “body positivity” and “self-love,” online fitness coaches such as Kayla Itsines, founder of the weight-loss program “Bikini Body Guides,” and Cassey Ho, creator of the YouTube channel “Blogilates,” have both cultivated cultures of “before and after photos” through which women (predominantly) post celebratory photos of themselves shedding fat and sporting their new and expensive active wear. Khloé Kardashian, a major participant in this online community of fit individuals, has not only created her own activewear line (Good American—a name which carries its own implications of what it means to look like and be a “good” citizen in this culture), but has also started her own *The Biggest Loser*-esque television show to further disseminate messages of fatphobia and body-image destruction. *Revenge Body with Khloé Kardashian* encourages its participants to seek revenge on exes by becoming ‘hot,’ toned, fit, and, thus, suggests that fat is

⁷ The online fitness community has skyrocketed due to platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and the Apple App Store. For example, in “The 8 Best Online Exercise Classes of 2020,” *Verywell Fit* lists various online weight-loss and fitness programs that have risen in popularity in 2020. Significantly, the list names Jillian Michaels’ website as the “Best [website] for Reaching Your Health Goals.” However, Michaels, a former coach on *The Biggest Loser*, came under scrutiny in January of 2020 for making fatphobic comments about American singer-songwriter, Lizzo. During an appearance on *BuzzFeed News*’s AM2DM show on January 8, Michaels shamed Lizzo’s fatness: “Why are we celebrating her [Lizzo’s] body? [...] It isn’t going to be awesome if she gets diabetes” (Esmonde 2020). Articles claiming to promote ‘health’ and ‘wellness,’ such as that of *Verywell Fit*, frighteningly often provide a platform to anti-fat rhetoric.

something that must be eradicated in order to achieve true happiness through monogamy.⁸

Unfortunately, these themes even trickle into beloved online-streaming services, such as Netflix. In August of 2018, Lauren Gussis' web television series *Insatiable* first appeared on Netflix. However, before the show's release, a *Change.org* petition was circulated on social media and called for the immediate cancellation of the fatphobic, body-shaming, and thin-celebratory series. *Insatiable* not only follows the protagonist (Patty) on her journey from fat high-schooler to thin pageant queen through starvation (as a result of her jaw being wired shut from a fatphobic act of assault), but the show also has its lead actress, Debby Ryan, wearing a fat suit to depict Patty's transformation. However, while outrageous displays of fatphobia and body shaming are often overt, as can be seen through *Insatiable*, more systemic, insidious, and internalized instances of fatphobia are even found in shows that celebrate inclusion, diversity, and self-love. For example, in her heartfelt letter, "An Open Letter to Queer Eye - Re: Fatphobia," Body Acceptance Coach Kristina Bruce addresses the numerous instances of fatphobia on Netflix's hit show

⁸ Kardashian's show suggests that changing your body helps you to find a new partner who will find you desirable. Kardashian implies that you have to not only get 'revenge' on your former partner, but you must, also, find personal 'happiness' and 'healing' through thinness. In other words, becoming thin allows you to move on from your past hardships.

Queer Eye.⁹ As Bruce elucidates, fatphobia is central to North American cultural practices and discourse:

Fatphobia is so woven into the fabric of our culture that it's difficult to even see. However once you see it, you can't unsee it. [...] As soon as I saw the displays of fatphobia on the show my heart sunk. I was naïve in thinking the show would be free of weight stigma, considering how inclusive it aims to be, **but that's how insidious weight stigma is – we often don't even realize when it's happening.** What makes it even harder to detect, its that we've *internalized* this stigma - believing it to be true about ourselves and our bodies. (2018)

As Bruce highlights, comments made by *Queer Eye* hosts such as Tan France¹⁰ and Antoni Porowski reinforce misconceptions that fat is ugly or unhealthy and, therefore, must be either covered up or eradicated. For example, style-expert France regularly refers to how “slimming” or “flattering” his curated outfits appear on show participants. Similarly, Porowski often exhibits judgment toward the eating habits of contestants; for instance, in the fourth episode of Season Three, when the participant, Robert, expresses love for his daughter and concern about her weight, Porowski condescendingly replies: “Well, who’s feeding her?” (“When Robert Met Jamie,” *Queer Eye*). As the messaging through shows like *Queer Eye* suggests, we must monitor, scrutinize, and discipline our bodies in order to avoid ‘appearing’ fat to the outside world. What results from these

⁹ In *Fat Gay Men: Girth, Mirth, and the Politics of Stigma*, Jason Whitesel draws attention to the fatphobia and body shaming that gay men simultaneously face and perpetuate. Whitesel argues that gay fat men face particular stigma: “Big gay men incur social wounds produced by the stigma of their size and sexuality combined. As looks are one of the organizing features of the gay world, gay big men have an added exclusion. [...] Gay big men are thus marginalized both for their sexual orientation in a heteronormative society and for their size in gay society” (Whitesel 2).

¹⁰ Notably, France also did a cameo for the premiere of Season Three of *Revenge Body with Khloé Kardashian* on 7 July 2019.

innumerable fatphobic messages and images is a plethora of individuals who may not actually be ‘Fat,’¹¹ but instead ‘feel’ fat and, therefore, come to fear fat. This rhetoric, in turn, places an unfair and unfounded scrutiny on fat people, as medical professionals and discourse exhibit judgment under false equations of health and weight.

Unlike the overtly anti-fat messaging circulated by popular culture, Awad does not provide readers any specific numbers or measurements to indicate her protagonist Lizzie’s size. In an interview with Carrie Simonelli for *TCA Regional News* in 2016, Awad asserts that this omission is intentional: “‘It’s meant to be ambiguous so that any woman can put herself in Lizzie’s place.’ she says. ‘The notion of fat is very subjective, it can just depend on who you are standing beside on any given day’” (Simonelli 2016; quoting Awad). By excluding numeric details about Lizzie’s weight, Awad not only refuses to replicate and perpetuate a dialogue that shames individuals with larger dress sizes, but she also demonstrates the universality and relatability of ‘feeling’ fat in culture fuelled by fat-shaming and anti-fat messaging. Under the intense scrutiny of both ourselves and the outside world, there is no escaping the visibility of our bodies; they are public projects.

¹¹ The distinction between “feeling fat” and “being fat” is slippery. In *The Weight of Images: Affect, Body Image and Fat in the Media*, Katariina Kyrölä argues that body image is a combination of both physiology, and also how one sees their body in relation to other bodies: “Body image [...] is not the same as but nevertheless draws on the actual physiology of a gendered body and is inseparable from it. Thus, we are talking about something that is not the same as cultural body norms or ideals but brings together norms and lived experiences. Changes in the body affect body image; changes and trends in the surroundings, including media imagery, affect it as well. Summing up, body image is fruitful to see as an interface of sorts, a dynamically forming zone of postures that we take towards images and the world, postures we take towards ourselves and others in ways that are informed by media imageries around us” (Kyrölä 23).

Because of the inherent visibility of our bodies and the presence (or lack thereof) of fat, many members of North American society feel as if we are constantly being watched, analyzed, and judged for our appearance. Moreover, the ways that we are treated in society and the privileges we may or may not have are a direct result of this hyper-visibility. In *13 Ways*, Awad's Lizzie takes this panopticism¹² one step further, and suggests that everyone is a part of an organized system of fatphobia and food fear-mongering orchestrated by a higher power. For example, when describing women exercising at the gym, an adult-aged Lizzie suggests that they are clones who are unaware of the dangerous system that they are empowering:

I try not to look at them. If I look at their temple sweat, at their mouths half-open and panting, at their faces contorted with focus or thought annihilation or dreams of impossible future selves, at their eyes skimming pulp fiction or fashion magazines, at their leg cellulite, which is just as discernible through their gym shorts as it was when I first moved here two years ago, I'll begin to feel like we're all a bunch of sad, fat Rodentia upon whom a terrible, sick joke is being played. Like somewhere up there in the cheap stucco ceiling is a hidden camera and an audience laughing uproariously at our useless sweat beats, our mottled flesh, which these hours have done nothing to exercise. (Awad 193)

As Lizzie explains, women and people of other marginalized genders need to fixate on their bodies and the eradication of fat. Because of the hypervisibility of their bodies and the panoptic nature of body shaming and gazing within the Canadian cultures Awad depicts, there is never a time when individuals are safe from body scrutiny. This

¹² Michel Foucault's theory of the panopticon in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, helps to explain the hyper-visibility of bodies in contemporary western societies, which are fundamentally shaped by mechanisms of surveillance from cell-phone trackers and built-in cameras to home security systems and nanny-cams. In it, he discusses Jeremy Bentham's "Panopticon"—a building with a tower at the centre from which an individual of power can see into the cell of every prisoner, but where prisoners cannot see their punishers (Foucault 203).

judgment derives from no single source, and it is everywhere. Not only are fatphobic messages plastered on magazine covers, television screens, and broadcasted over radios, but we also face the scrutiny of our peers, co-workers, complete strangers that we encounter, and even ourselves. As Foucault argues, we internalize power structures and discipline ourselves, simply because someone else might be watching and judging us: “The inmate must never know whether he is being looked at at any one moment; but he must be sure that he may always be so” (Foucault 201). Everyone is a part of this system, and, as Lizzie suggests, our participation in this enterprise allows it to replicate and continue to cause harm.

As Cressida J. Heyes argues in “Foucault Goes to Weight Watchers,” this disciplinary, fatphobic system depends on the willful participation of its subjects, or, in other words, prisoners. Participation in diet cultures and fat-shaming is falsely labeled as ‘hard-working,’ ‘disciplined,’ and ‘healthy,’ and, as a consequence, weight-loss programs are hugely popular in North American countries. These programs place the onus on the weight-loser, and imply that it is the responsibility of anyone who looks ‘fat’ to try and lose weight. Heyes highlights the ‘voluntary’ nature of such participation:

Unlike prisoners or schoolchildren, we have elected to place ourselves under the care of this institution, and have only ourselves to blame if we fail to follow its good advice to the letter. [...] As willing participants in a disciplinary technology, dieters measure and scrutinize themselves far more precisely and conscientiously than those who must be educated into more reluctant self-monitoring behaviors. The organized diet program is thus a particularly extreme version of panoptic culture, which is why it attracts this kind of Foucauldian attention. (134)

Heyes suggests that participating in diet cultures is a conscious and self-determined choice. This agency is insidious and dangerous, as it, consequently, leads individuals to

blame themselves and their bodies when they fail to lose the fat and weight. In addition, with the all-encompassing presence of fatphobic messaging and body-shaming in 2020 as a result of social media, one must really question how much ‘choice’ is involved in dieting anymore when even children are bombarded daily with such messaging. From the privacy of our own bedrooms, we can access an entire world of weight-loss messaging from our fingertips, and can purchase diet and exercise programs with the single touch of a finger on our iPhone. Today, our ‘choosing’ is certainly influenced by the coercion of the fatphobic media that surrounds us and our every move.

Lizzie exhibits this learned bodily judgment from the outset of *13 Ways*. Even as young teenagers, she and her best friend, Mel, understand that they are simply just two girls who are a part of a larger system of bodily objectification and sexualization of women. At the novel’s opening, Awad provides readers with a scene of the two high-school girls eating McFlurries at a Mississauga McDonald’s while being watched by a group of adult men. Lizzie and Mel consider this predatory behaviour normal, and also essential for girls to experience in order to become ‘women’:

The universe is against us, which makes sense. So we get another McFlurry and talk about how fat we are for a while. But it doesn’t matter how long we talk about it or how many times Mel assures me she’s a fucking whale beneath her clothes; I know I’m fatter. Not by a little either. Mel has an ass, I’ll give her that, but that’s all I’ll give her. If I win the fat argument then Mel will say, so what I’m way prettier than she is, but I think face-wise we’re about the same. I haven’t really grown into my nose yet or discovered the arts of starving myself and tweezing. So I’ll be honest with you. In this story, I don’t look that good, except for maybe my skin, which Mel claims she would kill for. Also my tits. Mel says they’re huge and she assures me it’s a good thing. Maybe even too much of a good thing, she says. It’s Mel who got me using the word *tits*. I have trouble calling them anything even in my thoughts. They embarrass me and all the words for them embarrass me, but I’m trying, for Mel’s sake, to name my assets. (3)

In this passage, Lizzie demonstrates that she is young enough to be embarrassed by her breasts while, simultaneously, ‘old’ enough to see that her body is meant to be examined, prodded, and scrutinized for the benefit of the male gaze. As a result, neither she nor Mel appear to be disturbed by the group of middle-aged men sitting nearby at McDonalds and ogling them. Lizzie comments that the men “look like they are around [her] father’s age” (Awad 5), yet she considers this male gaze to be normal rather than dangerous. In response to the attention of the older men, Mel shows off her breasts while telling Lizzie that “these particular men can feel her sex vibes” (Awad 4); Mel even goes so far to suggest that she and Lizzie should perform oral sex on them. Because the novel opens with this scene, experiencing this sort of objectification is positioned as an already normal and frequent part of the lives of young women and girls. As such, from a young age, Lizzie is taught that her body is a spectacle, with its sole purpose being to entertain and capture the attention of others—particularly heterosexual men.

Lizzie continually seeks this male approval as her true source of value and worth. She treats her body according to the persistent gaze of men, and, as a result, feels as if they always scrutinize her for how she looks. Significantly, Lizzie seeks refuge in creating alter-egos in online chat rooms. Under the guise of different names, such as Bettie, Lizzie strives to escape social judgment of her fatness and becomes a thin, sexy, Bettie Page-like woman (as shown by the pin-up girl posters on her bedroom wall) who older men long to communicate with online. However, when one particular older man wants her to send him a full-body picture, Lizzie realizes that she cannot hide her

appearance forever. Fowles argues that this inescapable and oppressive male gaze renders women's desires irrelevant in heteronormative relations between men and women:

By default, [Lizzie] longs for the attention of men, seeking them out online but afraid to send along a full body photo because of her weight. As a skinnier friend does Lizzie's makeup and snaps some sexy pictures, we are hit with the critique that women are meant to see their worth by means of men's desire for them. In fact, the male gaze makes a weighted appearance in almost every one of these vignettes. (Fowles 2016)

Despite Lizzie's discomfort and avoidance of the full-body pictures, the chat-room man persists. Lizzie knows from past relentless and sexual messages from the man that he will continue to ask for photographs, so she decides to send them in order to maintain his companionship and attention. However, as she takes the photographs herself, Lizzie struggles to capture an image that conceals her fat and makes her feel desirable. She realizes that, if her online lover finally sees her, she can no longer keep her weight a secret.

To maintain her online facade, Lizzie commandeers the help of her skinny friend, China, and asks China to take some sexy, full-body photographs. Lizzie hopes that, in asking her friend for help, some of China's real-life desirability will be passed along to her: "If she took the photo. Did my eyes. Helped me choose my clothes. She's really into art, so she probably knows all about angles. I feel a surge of something like hope" (Awad 30). Lizzie frequently notes that China is her skinny friend. She tries to emulate China's style and appearance so that she too can become a constant object of male desire and value; Lizzie begins smoking, copying China's makeup, and wearing similar clothes in order to feel like her skinnier friend. However, China appears to resent these similarities,

and reminds Lizzie that she is the fat one in this relationship. For example, when a waitress comments that the two girls look like sisters, China quickly retorts that they are not related: “That waitress is always asking us, ‘Are you two sisters?’ And China tells her, ‘No. We’re not. We’re definitely not.’ Then she looks at me and says, ‘You’re beautiful all on your own’” (Awad 26). China’s thinness is inescapable; moreover, rather than acknowledging her body as a source of privilege, China jokes about fatness and identifies with it in a sort of mockery of Lizzie’s body type: “[China’s] big feet are the only thing big about her and she just turns them into wit. *If they are any smaller, I’d fall over. Any bigger, I’d step on you*” (Awad 42). China cannot relate to Lizzie’s negative body image; while Lizzie longs to be associated with China, for China, these connections are undesirable and laughable.

In preparation for her photoshoot with China, Lizzie convinces herself that, in order to look thin and desirable for her online lover, she must dress herself and carry herself as China would. China, who has numerous men who pursue her, is an anomaly to Lizzie, and, therefore, she embodies the ideal body type. Before China arrives, Lizzie scrutinizes her closet in search of clothing that China would wear, and lays out multiple outfits in the hopes that her friend will help choose the perfect one that will make her look sexy and sophisticated. Significantly, she leaves on the days-old eyeliner that China applied for her, and tries to encapsulate every aspect of her friend that will not even appear in photographs: “All evening, I avoid mirrors even though I’m dead curious. I smell like China, who boys burn pictures of, they’re so mad at her for not loving them back” (Awad 31). Lizzie wants her photographs to be as intoxicating as those of China.

Despite her attempts to embody her friend, Lizzie poses unnaturally and uncomfortably: “After [China] gives me a very slight nod of her head, I arrange myself in my chair and crane my neck as far forward as possible while letting my hair fall in front of my face” (Awad 37). However, China’s enthusiasm is lacking, and she responds to Lizzie’s attempts at sexiness with disinterest and even cruelty by offering offhand comments about Lizzie’s eye makeup. Significantly, after the photos are taken, Lizzie’s realizes that she will never be China: “I look at the photos on the camera’s LCD monitor. They’re the same if not worse than the ones I had before. I look startled in most of them. Overexposed. Pissed. My makeup is terrible. I do look like I’ve been punched in the eyes” (Awad 41). After this encounter, Lizzie decides that if she remains fat, unskilled with makeup, and uncomfortable in front of a camera, neither China nor men will see her as desirable.

In response to this revelation about the intimate linkage between social judgments and bodily size, Lizzie dedicates her life to losing weight and fearing fat as if it were contagious. In “Differences by Degree: Fatness, Contagion and Pre-emption,” Tim Brown argues that medical and social networks perpetuate fatphobia by referring to fatness and obesity as “infectious” and “contagious”: “Being ‘fat’ remains a signifier of moral and physical decay; if we add to this the suggestion that obesity is spread within social networks, it is possible that the stigma associated with body size will begin to mirror that which is attached to other infectious bodies” (Brown 117). Similarly, Lizzie focuses her existence on the avoidance of fatness. In the novel’s first chapter, an older Lizzie narrates the life of her younger self, and foreshadows her lifelong struggle with

food and body image: “Later on I’m going to be really fucking beautiful. I’m going to grow into that nose and develop an eating disorder. I’ll be hungry and angry all my life but I’ll also have a hell of a time” (Awad 6-7). In “Guilt-Free and Sinfully Delicious: A Contemporary Theology of Weight Loss Dieting,” Emily J. Contois asserts that the act of avoiding fat holds religious significance despite weight loss cultures being ‘secular.’ Contois suggests that this is because “dieting theology harnesses the power of doctrine to secure lifelong followers in a quest for thinness, which is constructed as not only the physical, but also the moral opposite of fatness” (112). In weight loss discourse, thinness provides “a form of salvation” (114); Lizzie herself participates in this theology as she relentlessly pursues the ‘ideal’ thin body and avoids fat through weight loss practices.

Essentially, Lizzie’s adult life is shaped by her efforts to become the beautiful woman that she never got to be as a young girl or teenager. In her book, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*, Susan Bordo argues that this negative association with the body is unfortunately all too common for women:

Culture not only has taught women to be insecure bodies, constantly monitoring themselves for signs of imperfection, constantly engaged in physical ‘improvement’; it also is constantly teaching women (and, let us not forget, men as well) how to *see* bodies. As slenderness has consistently been visually glamorized, and as the ideal has grown thinner and thinner, bodies that a decade ago were considered slender have now come to seem fleshy. (Bordo 57)

This control, however, comes at a price, and soon Lizzie is consumed by calorie counting, food restriction, and even misses out on enjoyable events and experiences out of fear of becoming ‘fat.’ Contois elucidates that behaviours such as these represent a form of dieting theology: “Dieting theology possesses its own practices, rites, and rituals,

such as counting calories (or in low-carb diets, grams of carbohydrate), tracking minutes of exercise, and weighing oneself on a scale” (Contois 114). In the same vein, Bordo argues that this desire to shrink and master the body stems from a western desire for women to have tight, contained, and controllable bodies: “Areas that are soft, loose, or ‘wiggly’ are unacceptable, even on extremely thin bodies. Cellulite management, like liposuction, has nothing to do with weight loss, and everything to do with the quest for firm bodily margins” (Bordo 190-1). As a consequence, Lizzie positions her body as a prison. She is a prisoner in a system which polices her every move and appearance while, simultaneously, she is imprisoned by her own flesh. However, in attempting to escape this stranglehold, Lizzie becomes further entrenched in this fatphobic system and is contained physically and psychologically by her restrictive eating habits.

Certainly, while diet cultures prioritize male desire and corporate greed, Awad highlights that the responsibility and onus of maintaining this system is on women. Achieving these beauty standards, however, can be an impossible feat; significantly, as a woman of colour, Lizzie can never achieve ‘whiteness’—even though she strives for the ‘happiness’ represented by the thin, white ideal. Therefore, many women who meet the racist, sexist, and fatphobic criteria of ‘desirability’ benefit from social privileges that Lizzie often lacks. Furthermore, while Lizzie fights to maintain a look of desirability and conventional beauty, the men in Awad’s book stand invisibly on the sidelines and act as detached observers to the ‘cattiness’ of woman vs. woman conflict. In one especially ridiculous scene, Lizzie’s coworker/sex partner, Archibald, watches as his girlfriend (who is the same size as Lizzie) discovers that her boyfriend has been cheating and barges in

on Lizzie and Archibald during sex. Archibald merely witnesses, reaping the benefits of invisibility while, simultaneously, escaping any responsibility for the perpetuation of this destructive behaviour; he appears to function only as an observer of this conflict.

Unsurprisingly, Lizzie encounters her fair share of less-than-admirable men—including, but not limited to, her absentee father, her older online lover, the creepy McDonald's ogler, and her stoner coworker/lover. Such men are always present in Awad's chapters, but are often unaware of the diet cultures that they uphold, and, in turn, shift the responsibility of their actions onto Lizzie and other women. Moreover, the men in Awad's novel often cannot see beyond Lizzie's fatness; they fail to recognize her humanity. For instance, when drunkenly stumbling to Lizzie's house for late-night sex, Archibald describes her as just another item in the household: "There is the swaying yellow square of light that is her front window. There are the carefully clipped rosebushes you once retched in. There are her mother's window boxes full of fussy little purple flowers you can't help but finger, giggling. There is the fat girl filling the side doorframe, waving you away from the front entrance" (Awad 14). As Awad suggests, Archibald benefits from Lizzie's position as an 'object.'

Paradoxically, while the men in Awad's text view Lizzie as less than human, they, simultaneously, dismiss her self-conscious feelings of monstrosity. Lizzie's husband, Tom, understands that his wife's relationship with food is unhealthy, yet does little to nothing to support her in seeking help and moving through her negative food feelings. Instead, he is often frustrated with her food obsession, and cannot comprehend the ways that she views herself and her body. For example, at a barbecue with all of his male

friends and their wives, Tom is downright embarrassed by Lizzie's inability to fit in with the other wives: "She's sulking in the passenger's seat, hunched over a veggie platter with a ramekin of fat-free hummus in the center. Hunched as much as she can be, given that she is wearing yet another far-too-tight dress. New. Black, like she's in mourning. Patterned with small, prim flesh-colored flowers. Fishnets. Heels. To a barbecue" (Awad 134-5). While Lizzie's inability to freely enjoy barbecue food is certainly tragic in itself, instead of extending sympathy and aid to his wife, Tom exhibits judgment: "'Do you think they'll be okay barbecuing this?' [Lizzie] says suddenly, holding up a soggy Yves burger in a plastic bag. Tom winces at the sight of the fake grill marks, the sad little kernels of corn and pea poking out of the damp taupe patty" (Awad 136-7). Lizzie, unfortunately, is fully aware of her husband's disdain, which only fuels her feelings of insufficiency and helplessness. Consequently, when Lizzie catches Tom seeking refuge from his marriage in 'fat girl' porn, Lizzie turns this judgment inwards, and continues to view herself as less than desirable to her husband and the outside world.

Lizzie's feelings of self-disgust and monstrosity reflect fatphobic societal perceptions of fat as grotesque—that is, distorted, unnatural, and disfigured. Fat is positioned in North American society as something that is to be feared, rejected, and, therefore, ejected from society. In her article "Monstrous Freedom: Charting Fat Ambivalence," Lesleigh J. Owen claims that fatness is "a site of ambivalence and paradox" that reflects our "deepest fears and desires" (Owen 2). Because of its lack of clear boundaries, fatness is a "scary, liminal, shadowed place where certainties fizzle" (Owen 2). Fat resists clear cut distinctions between the "self" and "other," and

subverts the smooth bodily margins that are promoted through the valorization of thinness and fitness. Rather than being closed and pure, or thin and toned, bodies with visible fat suggest a more fluid and messy relationship between bodies and the external world. Owen uses Julia Kristeva's theory of "abjection" to assert fat's social marginalization. As Kristeva explains in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, the loss of distinction between self and other frighteningly causes us to identify with the very things we reject. Therefore, the "abject" is that which disturbs social systems and order:

There looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. [...] It beseeches, worries, and fascinates desire, which, nevertheless, does not let itself be seduced. Apprehensive, desire turns aside; sickened, it rejects. [...] The abject has only one quality of the object—that of being opposed to *I*." (1)

Because Lizzie identifies with fatness, she, simultaneously, is horrified by this connection and rejects it. She dedicates her life to reminding herself of her past and present fatness in order to fully eradicate it from her future.

Lizzie's shame surrounding fat and her rejection of fatness stems from her strained relationship with her parents. In her teenaged years, Lizzie exhibits a fatphobic frustration towards her mother, and has little patience for the fact that her mother does not desire to be thin: "I see how she hasn't been with anyone since my father left when I was five. I see she's a fat, middle-aged woman with a heart condition, so how many men does she really have to choose from?" (Awad 34). Lizzie notes that she inherits this disdain for fat women from her father. Lizzie's father embodies a predominantly western perspective on fatness, and he unfairly demonizes fatness as a decision to be 'lazy.' Lizzie claims that

her father is not proud of her once she loses weight as an adult; instead, he merely views it as her finally doing the ‘right’ thing:

My father has always felt that being fat was a choice. When I was in college I would sometimes meet him for lunch or coffee, and he would stare at my extra flesh like it was some weird piece of clothing I was wearing just to annoy him. [...] Not really part of me, just something I was doing to rebel, prove him wrong. I started seeing him even less. Now, I wouldn’t say he’s proud of me. As far as he is concerned, things have just become as they should be. (Awad 105)

Lizzie grows up experiencing her father’s fatphobia. For example, as one of her birthday gifts, Lizzie’s father gives her a photo taken during her childhood before she started to gain what he considers to be an ‘unacceptable’ amount of weight: “He included it in an album of photos that he gave me as part of my birthday gift, one that was presumably meant to show me that I hadn’t always been fat. Look. See? Where did I get this idea? Maybe from my mother, he said. Probably it was all from my mother. *She* always struggled. But you? Look” (Awad 86). Throughout her childhood and young adulthood, Lizzie learns to blame her mother for her own fatness, and to reject and be disgusted by any mother-daughter resemblance. Unlike Nawaz’s Beena and Sadhana in *Bone and Bread* who desperately long for tangible connections to their late mother, during her mother’s lifetime, Lizzie appears horrified by and resentful of the similarities that she shares with her self-accepting mother.

Lizzie’s mother, conversely, shows consistent support for her daughter and views her as beautiful during every stage of her life—even before Lizzie starts actively losing weight. However, when Lizzie begins to spiral into disordered eating and extreme dieting, her mother does not appear to understand the severity of the situation, and

cheerleads her daughter through her western weight loss ‘journey.’ Significantly, Lizzie’s mother wants to dress her daughter up in fancy clothes and show her off, and regularly goes with Lizzie on shopping trips. In the changing rooms, her mother appears oblivious to the negative self-image that Lizzie is experiencing:

It’s true that when it comes to shopping for clothes, I have a history of having a bad attitude. That’s what my mother said to me all the time. *You have a bad attitude. You’re making this harder than it has to be.* Especially now that I’ve started losing, she seems to think everything looks good on me and is particularly intolerant of my complaints.” (Awad 89)

A mutual misunderstanding develops between mother and daughter—with a daughter who cannot understand why her mother cannot see her pain, and a mother who cannot understand why her daughter does not think she is beautiful.

For Lizzie, however, the changing rooms in clothing stores are a triggering and utterly depressing environment. While the fluorescent lighting and poorly-placed mirrors are certainly kind to nobody, trying on clothing and shopping for outfits can be a particularly distressing experience for those with disordered eating and body image issues. Moreover, practically speaking, contemporary clothing and fashion trends are often downright inaccessible to plus-sized and fat individuals. For example, as Roxane Gay articulates in her memoir *Hunger*, clothing store choices for fat people are extremely limited and unexciting, and can make shopping an entirely negative experience: “Buying clothes is an ordeal. It is but one of many humiliations fat people endure. I hate clothes shopping [...] because I know I’m not going to find anything I actually want to

wear” (Gay 178). Similarly, Lizzie directly expresses this concern, and states that the options for fat people are just simply not there:¹³

I watch the fat female shoppers within pawing through the racks, presumably hunting for The Least of All Evils: a black cardigan without rhinestone jetties or webs of pearl across the front; a stretchy adorned V- or scoop neck. Back when I had to shop here, I used to do the same. I’d spend hours hunting for something—anything—that would render me moderately fuckable. (Awad 183)

Moreover, these corporations and the thin people who uphold and support them simply do not understand bodies that are larger than their own. For example, when shopping for a dress, Lizzie encounters a changing-room attendant, Trixie, who cannot comprehend Lizzie’s insecurities and inability to conform to thin fashion standards. When a dress does not fit Lizzie correctly, Trixie makes a myriad of suggestions while, simultaneously, failing to listen to Lizzie’s concerns:

That’s the thing with Trixie. She always has a solution. “You could just put a cute necklace! With a pendant that covers this part? Or a scarf! What about a scarf and tie it here?” she says, her fingers hovering over the wide space between the teeth. She asks if she can show me a scarf? [...] Like by tying this mismatching scarf around my neck, a scarf that looks ridiculous with the dress not just in pattern but in principle, she’s shown me a solution to the problem of my flesh. (Awad 90-1)

When Lizzie expresses that she wants to simply wear the dress on its own (just as any thin woman would be able to), Trixie is unsympathetic and grows increasingly irritated: “[Trixie] gives me a look like perhaps given my size and all, I want too much?” (Awad 92). This experience, however, is all too common for Lizzie, and she is, once again, reminded that her body does not ‘fit’ the thin status quo.

¹³ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick similarly draws attention to the lack of clothing options for fat people in *Divinity: A Dossier A Performance Piece A Little-Understood Emotion*. She opens the piece with a dream in which Bloomingdale’s actually carried all of the clothes that she wanted in her size (Sedgwick and Moon 292).

Unfortunately, by consistently admiring her daughter's beauty, Lizzie's mother often overlooks the instances of deep sadness and negative body image that Lizzie experiences through her social interactions. For example, Lizzie's mother purchases and prepares flashy outfits for her daughter that will show off her new, thinner body to the outside world. This, however, makes Lizzie extremely uncomfortable. One dress is so egregious that Lizzie describes it as "the color of Pepto-Bismol" (Awad 98)—as if the outfit itself puts her off eating more and causes her metaphorical indigestion. However, Lizzie begrudgingly complies, and out of her love for her mother, she wears the ridiculous outfits. In one particular instance, Lizzie gets dolled-up for a dinner with her mother's coworkers (all of whom are men), and feels ridiculous: "I don't know about this outfit,' I tell my mother. [...] My wide slash of bared stomach feels like an emergency no one is attending to, my feet feel like they're doing bad porn under a table. Shoulder and hip still buzzing from where she cut the price tag loops off with a butter knife" (Awad 93). When her coworkers arrive, Lizzie's mother brags about Lizzie's fitness habits, and has her daughter flaunt her biceps and spin in a circle to show off her outfit. While Lizzie understands that her mother is trying to demonstrate pride and affection, Lizzie feels as if the display is shallow and dehumanizing. Evidently, her mother conflates Lizzie's thinness with happiness. Moreover, as is all too common in contemporary diet cultures, women who religiously diet and exercise are lauded as 'disciplined,' 'hardworking,' and 'admirable.' Not surprisingly then, Lizzie's mother shows off her daughter, like a trophy, to all of her colleagues.

The unbreakable link between being thin and being happy becomes particularly evident in scenes where Lizzie and her mother purchase groceries and order food. For instance, in a telling scene at the market, Lizzie's mother admires her daughter's ability to refuse temptation by resisting all of the delicious food and samples that surround them. This market scene serves in stark contrast to that between mother and daughters in *Bone and Bread*; while Nawaz's Beena and Sadhana cherish market trips with their mother as celebrations of food as the source of life, Awad's Lizzie and her mother, conversely, become particularly disconnected at the market. For Lizzie, grocery shopping provokes stress and discomfort, and her mother's presence amplifies this distress:

We stroll through the market, arm in arm, later. She walks me along the stalls like she's leading me down the aisle, loving how I'm immune to the plenty. How I wrinkle my nose, shake my head at everything but a Fuji and some fish for later, while she helps herself to fistfuls of whatever samples are there for the taking. We go to the monger's, where I buy my four ounces of whatever's fresh. She waits, watching me, and I feel the blaze of her eyes on my profile. (Awad 97)

Under her mother's gaze, Lizzie exercises control at the market; she can admire the food, but she cannot indulge out of fear of inappropriateness. However, while Lizzie's mother participates in the perpetuation of diet cultures in scenes, she, simultaneously, lives as a woman oppressed by the very forces that she helps to maintain. Nevertheless, Lizzie constantly feels her mother's excitement surrounding her daughter's newfound thinness. As a consequence, at all times, Lizzie is hyper-aware of the food that surrounds her and the ways that she interacts with it—because people constantly watch and observe the consumption of others.

Lizzie's behaviour highlights the commonality of consumption policing. In her dedication to thinness, she, like her mother, actively participates in a larger system in which women feel justified in commenting on the bodies, eating habits, and fitness routines of other women. Consequently, Lizzie discovers that the body, and, in particular, the feminine body, is the focus of constant public commentary. Because of the visibility of the woman's physical body as an object of exchange,¹⁴ surrounding individuals falsely believe that they have the right to judge it. In an article for *The Atlantic* titled "The Tyranny of Workplace Food-Shamers," Amanda Mull elucidates that this phenomenon runs rampant in the workplace:

The ideas that weight loss is always positive and that being thin is a reliable indicator of overall health can make weight feel like an appropriate topic for workplace bonding. After all, size is public and observable. Even if your co-workers aren't picking on others, they might be using their own bodies as frequent conversation starters. [...] That tends to conscript people into the cycle of diet chat without the red flag of bullying. (Mull)

Lizzie experiences this food-shaming discourse first-hand in her young-adult years with a coworker that she secretly refers to as "Itsy Bitsy" (Awad 77) and "the girl I hate" (Awad 70). Lizzie loathes this girl both because of her thin stature, and also for her obliviousness to the privilege that she possesses as a thin woman in her ability to move through the world without being dismissed as 'fat' and 'lazy.' Unlike Lizzie, this woman consumes copious amounts of carbohydrates, sugars, and, quite frankly, delicious foods without

¹⁴ In "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex," Gayle Rubin argues that capitalism has turned women's bodies into exchangeable objects: "The exchange of women does not necessarily imply that women are objectified, in the modern sense, since objects in the primitive world are imbued with highly personal qualities. But it does imply a distinction between gift and giver. If women are the gifts, then it is men who are the exchange partners" (Rubin 44).

seemingly gaining a pound of fat on her body. Moreover, she cannot recognize her own luck, and judgmentally comments on Lizzie's different eating habits while, simultaneously, flaunting delicious meals and desserts in Lizzie's face. This girl's consumption of endless and yummy food infuriates Lizzie:

I watch her bite into the scone with her little bunny teeth. [...] She tilts her head back, closes her eyes, starts to make what must be groaning noises. [...] I pretend to look out the window at the dismal view of the street [...] and try not to think *Cunt*. [...] There's her groaning and there's her stick legs and there's her aggressively jutting clavicles. There's the Cookie Monster impression she does after she describes food she loves (*Om-Nom-Nom!*). There's how the largeness of the scone seems only to emphasize her impossible smallness. Mainly, there's the fact that she exists at all. (Awad 70)

Lizzie does not understand her coworker's love for food or her ability to enjoy it without veritable shame. For Lizzie, eating lunch with her thin coworker reminds her of the fat on her body that she cannot seem to escape.

While the coworker's ability to live joyously through the consumption of food, at first glance, appears admirable, she too exhibits fatphobic behaviours and an ignorance regarding the privileges that she carries as a thin, white woman in a western society. However, she does appear to be aware of discourses surrounding food and shame. Yet, rather than acknowledging their harmfulness, she instead parrots back comments about food and guilt in an effort to 'fit in' to contemporary food discussions, and, therefore, appropriates the experiences of individuals discriminated against for what they eat and how they look. For example, in an effort to excuse her dietary habits, Lizzie's coworker refers to her consumption of yummy foods as "Secret Eating" (Awad 75). After returning from a lunch trip with Lizzie, Itsy Bitsy pretends to be shameful as she eats a decadent

dessert at her desk: “Itsy Bitsy is scheduling, while secret-eating a kardemummabullar, a cardamom bun, at her desk. She’s pretending to secret-eat for my sake, to make me laugh, like look what a pig she is, she can’t even wait until lunch. She over-crackles the paper bag, does shifty eyes before each superbite” (Awad 85). To Lizzie, this display is ridiculous, and her coworker’s attempts at food guilt camaraderie are deemed to be insincere and entirely tone-deaf. Lizzie sees the hypocrisy in her coworker’s behaviour. Even though she proclaims herself as someone who understands Lizzie’s negative self-image, Lizzie’s coworker actually perpetuates it, and frequently comments on Lizzie’s meals when they are eating together:

“That salad’s small,” she says.

“Not really,” I say, bringing the bowl closer to me. “It only looks small.”

But she won’t let it be. She lifts her heart-shaped sunglasses, leans forward, peers down into the bowl, and sort of wrinkles her nose like she’s just smelled something awful.

“It looks small because it is small,” she says, sitting back. She cocks her head to one side, like I’m curious. “How come you got that?” (Awad 75)

This coworker’s inappropriate comments both exhibit the entitlement women feel to express judgment towards other women, and also remind Lizzie of her inability to eat ‘fun’ foods without gaining weight. As a consequence, these lunch dates provoke intense shame, and simply serve as a reminder to Lizzie that differs from thin women, and that she will always live a life of restricted eating.

This culture of dieting and food shaming also exists in Lizzie’s other places of work. Significantly, when Lizzie begins working at a different establishment, she meets a coworker, Eve, who similarly displays signs of disordered eating and negative self-image. However, unlike Itsy Bitsy (who only performs her self-loathing), Lizzie has an affection

for Eve that likely stems from their shared disdain for their bodies. Lizzie describes the dismal lunches that Eve brings to work:

Her unripe peach, her tub of fat-free Greek yogurt sprinkled sparingly with some sort of seedling. If she's really famished, she might peck at a handful of almonds, which she'll count out first in her palm like pills. They come from a Costco container, onto which she has scrawled "Do Not Eat! Eve's :)" with a Sharpie. Unbeknownst to Eve, I steal from this container all the time. (Awad 164)

Lizzie feels a sameness and camaraderie with Eve, and after Lizzie and her husband separate, Eve welcomes Lizzie into her apartment until she finds her own. However, Eve appears to have mastered self-control even more than Lizzie ever possibly could, and bakes elaborate desserts each day for her coworkers, but in which she does not indulge. As such, Eve is able to nurture others with food while, at the same time, depriving herself of joyful consumption. These desserts, Lizzie asserts, demonstrate the true lack of food control of all of her "middling" (what she coins the process of moving from fat to thin, or thin to fat) coworkers:

There's a bundt cake on the counter, obviously Eve's handiwork. [...] Already it's been more or less eaten. I picture all of my middling colleagues coming in one by one to cut themselves a slice with our dull communal knife. Patricia, who's been on the seventeen-day diet for the past five years. Mary, Sarah, and Lynne, all of whom are on some sort of point system. Madeline, who is attempting common sense to no avail. (Awad 164-5)

Lizzie, paradoxically, even crosses over to the side of her "middling" coworkers in a self-perceived moment of weakness and eats a piece of Eve's cake. In her admiration of Eve's discipline, Lizzie overlooks not only Eve's loneliness and joylessness surrounding food, but, simultaneously, she fails to recognize her own self-imposed deprivation.

Lizzie's self-destructive behaviour and disordered relationship with food causes her to project her own internalized fatphobia onto the people that surround her. This is not limited to the coworkers that she interacts with every day, but is also unfairly directed towards strangers and acquaintances. In *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defense*, Anna Freud¹⁵ describes "projection" as a defence mechanism through which an individual deflects their own intolerable feelings and behaviours onto others and the outside world. Freud notes that this behaviour is something that we learn in our childhood, and it is very common amongst children:

The use of the mechanism of projection is quite natural to the ego of little children throughout the earliest period of development. They employ it as a means of repudiating their own activities and wishes when these become dangerous and of laying the responsibility for them at the door of some external agent. (Freud 123)

Similarly, Lizzie re-directs her own self-loathing and fat-hatred onto other fat individuals who appear uncharacteristically content. In an effort to avoid consuming food altogether, Lizzie books manicures during her lunch break. In these scenes, Lizzie exhibits a lack of awareness for her own class privilege, as she can afford to skip lunch and repeatedly pay for spa services. These manicures are luxurious and decadent, and during the services, Lizzie taunts herself by being covered in all of the delicious foods that she will not eat: "She applies the brown sugar exfoliant to my forearms, which will be followed by a yogurt moisture massage. The brown sugar chafes, the yogurt cools. It's an exhilarating combination. I close my eyes" (Awad 159). Intentionally, Lizzie has her services provided by Cassie—a woman who is heavier than Lizzie and who, in turn, makes Lizzie

¹⁵ While Freud's theories have been largely debunked by psychologists, they remain relevant to literary theorists through the field of psychoanalytic literary theory.

feel less shameful about her own appearance: “That Cassie is even fatter than I remember sates me in ways I cannot explain” (Awad 156). This behaviour is, unfortunately and unsurprisingly, common between women. In a culture where we must work tirelessly to look our best, this process, naturally, turns into a competition of who best looks the part of ‘woman.’ Lizzie, however, appears particularly judgmental of Cassie, and is even shocked when she discovers that her manicurist has a husband: “Cassie got married recently. I couldn’t believe it when she first told me. At first, I thought it might have to do with the fact that she’s part of a very small religious community, people who see each other with the eyes of Jesus first” (Awad 161). As a result of her own internalized fatphobia, Lizzie fails to see Cassie’s own beauty and kindness, and she dismisses her by projecting her own insecurity (that fat people are not desirable).

However, Lizzie’s behaviour towards Cassie quickly escalates from judgmental to downright discriminatory and dehumanizing. Significantly, despite seeing Cassie for manicures regularly, Lizzie dismisses her existence as an autonomous person and frequently forgets her name: “I will not have lunch today. I will have Cammie. Cassie” (Awad 155). She does not view Cassie as a dynamic, multi-faceted individual, but, instead, as a lowly woman who is simply defined by her weight. To Lizzie, Cassie is repulsive, and reminds her too much of the fat on her own body that she longs to escape. In one instance, she is desperate to be free of Cassie’s oppressive touch during the manicure: “For I cannot bear the weight of her any longer. Her warm, fat touch becomes the opposite of comfort, it becomes oppressive. I need to be free of her. Now” (Awad 162). Lizzie’s fear of fat becomes so obsessive, that Lizzie comes to view Cassie’s fat as

contagious. As a result, after manicures, Lizzie examines herself to be sure than she is still thinner than Cassie: “I take my time reapplying my cupcake lip gloss in the cracked mirror, even though it really needs no reapplication. But after seeing Cassie, I like to briefly inspect my own facial hollows and angles. It’s a relief to see they’re all still there. That I didn’t get fat by proxy” (Awad 164). It appears that, within this system, Lizzie must compare herself to other people and highlight their ‘shortcomings’ in order to feel remotely at ease with her own appearance.

In *13 Ways*’ final pages, readers realize that Lizzie is finally becoming aware of her entrapment in an impossible system of misogyny and fatphobia. But she has no intention of changing her ways and relinquishing herself to ‘fatness.’ As she sits beside a fellow gym member, Char, outside of their apartment building, the two commiserate about how other women are failing at their weight-loss goals:

I nod and watch this woman pedaling in the dark. Was I like her? Surely not. Surely I was getting somewhere. Surely all my work was the work of progress toward attainable goals.

“Sad,” Char pipes up beside me. I see she’s looking at the woman too.

“Yes,” I agree. “Very sad.” [...]

“If she would just do interval training. That’s her problem. No interval training.” Smoke darts out of her mouth in little tongues.

“Your body needs to be surprised. Attacked. Always. You’ve got to shock your system constantly. Otherwise, you’re nowhere.” (Awad 210-11)

As the two women demonstrate, the body can never exist in the present. Instead, women are to find value in the constant improvement and manipulation of their anatomy, and this process is a form of identity-building. Char and Lizzie articulate that control over the body is positioned in diet cultures as not only a responsibility, but, also, as a choice, a gift, and an act of agency. However, as the final lines of Awad’s novel suggest, any

autonomy ‘gained’ in this system, such as the agency exhibited through dieting and exercise, is illusory. During a fire scare at Lizzie’s apartment, she notices that a woman remains inside the building’s gym and is ignoring the alarm: “Even though I know that woman must hear the sirens through the glass enclosure of the Malibu Club, she keeps pedaling. As I watch her through the glass, breathing in Char’s smoke, I feel dangerously close to a knowledge that is probably already ours for the taking, a knowledge that I know could change everything” (Awad 212). Awad and her protagonist propose that knowing we are trapped within the system may be all women can do within capitalist diet cultures. We can acknowledge that the alarm bells are ringing, but, at this point, any escape from imprisonment and judgment may merely be a pipe dream.

At a time when body-image and beauty ideals dominate our every move and are accessible at the touch of a finger, Mona Awad’s *13 Ways of Looking at a Fat Girl* is a critical voice in the argument against the very system that judges bodies for being different and ‘Other.’ In *13 Ways*, Awad uncovers the inherent fatphobia and misogyny present in contemporary diet cultures. While functioning under the guise of “body positivity,” messages disseminated over social media platforms are regularly exclusionary and promote messages of weight loss and bodily objectification. The very foundation of twenty-first century weight-loss and food-shaming discourse is contingent on the dehumanization of individuals who do not represent thin, fit (and usually white) ‘happiness.’ As Peggy Phelan articulates, if sheer visibility really provided power, “then almost-naked young white women should be running Western culture” (Phelan 10). In the same vein, Awad demonstrates that even women who ‘achieve’ this goal of western

beauty standards never really feel happy. Instead, they merely participate in a system that monitors their every move. Moreover, the journey to achieving beauty is never-ending. Rather, it is a life's work, and individuals are to dedicate their lives to their own suffering in order to exercise 'control' within this fatphobic system. Though Lizzie has yet to embrace her body at the novel's close, her awareness of the system she both participates in and is also oppressed by raises hopeful questions. Can an individual's consciousness of their position in diet cultures aid them in becoming more comfortable with food and their own body? Does food hold more possibilities for 'joy' than thinness? While Awad's own answer may be unclear, my next chapters argue that other writers in Canada, such as Saleema Nawaz and Tracey Lindberg, believe that, through community and connection, these positive food feelings can be cultivated.

CHAPTER 2: Food, Family, and Feminine Healing: Digesting Loss in Saleema Nawaz's *Bone and Bread*

What could possibly make two teenaged sisters stop menstruating at the same time? Moreover, what transpires as a result of this physiological shift? These are the questions that Saleema Nawaz asks in “Bloodlines”—a short story that appears in her 2008 debut collection *Mother Superior*. The answers to these queries, she suggests, are too complex to be fully developed in a single short story; by the time *Mother Superior* was released, Nawaz was already in the midst of turning “Bloodlines” into a novel. The resultant text, *Bone and Bread*, was published in 2013. This novel chronicles the lives of two mixed-race sisters living above their family’s bagel shop in Montreal’s Mile End neighbourhood, focusing in particular on the aftermath of the sudden and traumatic deaths of their parents—their father by heart attack, and their mother by choking on cooked chicken. Unlike Awad’s Lizzie, whose negative relationship with food stems from familial strain and conflict, sisters Beena and Sadhana in *Bone and Bread* feel most connected to their family members through food. However, after their parents die, Beena, the eldest sister and the novel’s narrator, stops menstruating as a result of an unplanned teenage pregnancy while, simultaneously, her younger sister, Sadhana, also stops menstruating as a result of disordered eating and mental illness. In an interview with Tyler Anderson for the *National Post*, Nawaz asserts that though the sisters’ periods stop for two different reasons, the cessations both derive from familial loss and anguish, ultimately: “Primary relationships are fascinating because they program so much of what

comes later. [...] If you have an eating disorder and if you're pregnant, you lose your period in both situations, even though they're kind of opposite" (Anderson 2013; quoting Nawaz). As Nawaz suggests, Sadhana's and Beena's coping mechanisms etch themselves onto the sisters' racialized bodies. While Beena grows visibly bigger and further alienated from her teenaged peers, Sadhana shrinks as she grapples with pervasive images of slim, white beauty, and suffers an untimely death.

While there have been popular engagements with the text, to date, there have been no scholarly responses to *Bone and Bread*. Yet Saleema Nawaz's fictional exploration of food and feminine bodies humanizes contemporary discussions of body image, dieting, and food-related shame. In *Bone and Bread*, Nawaz demonstrates that food functions as more than a nutrient source, and the body exists as more than a physical vessel.

Intergenerational trauma, personal hardships, and socio-economic positions manifest materially in the body through consumption and starvation. In other words, eating, digestion, and the gut directly relate to sociological trauma and interpersonal relationships. Before her death by choking, Beena and Sadhana's mother prophecies the sisters' diverging life paths with eerie prescience, and, by so doing, even illustrates the importance of the novel's title:

"There's a theory," Mama said, "that the universe is getting bigger. It will keep expanding, like a huge loaf of bread rising, like a great fat belly, until there's nothing left to make it out of, no more heat. It will be like a day that is so long it goes on forever, until time is a substance and it is made out of ice." [...] "There's also a theory," said Mama, "that the universe is getting smaller. Millions of years from now it's going to start shrinking and heating, like fat and flesh melting into bone, because it is the destiny of things to come together. All that there is will get closer and closer until there's no space anymore between anything, even between the things themselves." (Nawaz 16)

Indeed, in the wake of their mother's passing, the two sisters follow these same paths—Sadhana shrinks to bone and nothingness, while Beena's belly grows like rising bread. When mentioning that her baby's father, Ravi, has run away, Beena notes that she and Sadhana cannot escape their truths: "Sadhana and I had our secrets, but they told on the body. Ravi escaped his past without a trace" (Nawaz 298). As Nawaz proposes, the bodies of women and marginalized people are more than public projects and exhibitions of western values of thinness. Instead, humans are complex; we are socially-influenced beings who experience and often, wear, real trauma, hardship, and heartbreak on our bodies. Establishing a critical interaction with *Bone and Bread* highlights that hunger is much more than a physical and superficial feeling; like American writer Roxane Gay articulates, we feel this all-encompassing phenomenon "in the mind and the body and the heart and the soul" (Gay 193). As humans, not only do we take in food, but we also consume, digest, and process phenomena, such as loss, as we move through the world.

Central to Nawaz's text, however, is not only human grief, but tragedy that occurs within a mixed-race family in a western society. Significantly, Beena and Sadhana live in an apartment with their white mother and Sikh father above their family-owned bagel shop.¹⁶ In her article "Literary Approaches to Food Studies: Eating the Other," Kyla Wazana Tompkins explains that consumption is highly racialized. Notably, she shares a syllabus she circulated to students in a 2004 course at Pomona College; in this syllabus,

¹⁶ Nawaz draws attention to the Jewish heritage of this cuisine in Montreal.

Tompkins discusses the work of Black feminist critic bell hooks on consumption and racial identity:

hooks points to the consumption of racial and ethnic difference as a hallmark of bourgeois identity; she also critically notes that this “consumer cannibalism” in essence devours the evidence and testimony of the history of inequality. In doing so it erases the full historical subjectivity of the subject it consumes; eating here becomes the desiring and destructive mode through which otherness is both encountered and destroyed. (Tompkins 245)

As both Tompkins and hooks suggest, in the ‘consumption’ of the racial other and the fruits of their labour, individuals such as white Canadians feel as if they are participating in multiculturalism while, simultaneously, erasing the very difference they encounter. For example, the white citizens of Montreal and the American tourists in Nawaz’s novel feel themselves to be ‘liberal’ folks who purchase and are open to ‘ethnic’ goods. However, when multiracial existence in Canada occurs outside of such stereotypical and tokenistic bounds, as in the case of the refugee family, the Essaids, who seek asylum in Montreal, white Canadians become uncomfortable with the notion of immigrants who do not behave or conform to multicultural stereotypes. Furthermore, while the white individuals¹⁷ in Nawaz’s text are able to freely spend their spare cash on bagels, they

¹⁷ It is important to note that “white” does not include the Jewish bagel-buyers who are likely frequenting the Singh family shop as well. As most notably seen in the novels of Mordecai Richler, there was and continues to be a large Jewish presence in Montreal. Jewish bagel shops are significant in works such as Richler’s *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*, and there are literary tours (see *The Guardian*, 11 January 2011) of Richler’s Montreal that include bagel shops such as St Viateur in Montreal’s Mile End. As such, I do not wish to conflate Jewishness and privileged ‘whiteness’ here. In *To Be Suddenly White: Literary Realism and Racial Passing*, Steven J. Belluscio notes that the “tension” between being “white” and “white ethnic” may be “irresolvable” (35). Certainly, in Nawaz’s book, the non-Jewish white characters, and the white American tourists, possess social privilege in a structurally racist society.

appear unaware of the Singh family's dependence on the business. For example, when Papa dies, the store remains open: "Uncle was working downstairs, because nothing could close the bagel shop, not even this, the end of the world" (Nawaz 92). Furthermore, once they are orphaned, Sadhana and Beena depend on the profits from the bagel shop in order to survive. As a result, while, for the white individuals in the text, the bagel shop emblemizes multicultural success, it reminds the Singh family of the institutional racism that prevents people of colour from existing outside of tokenism and economic disparity.

Nawaz's *Bone and Bread* follows the lives of the two sisters through the perspective of the eldest, Beena, and chronicles their relationship to this bagel shop and their diverse family members. The text alternates back and forth through various points in time but is framed by the main, over-arching narrative of an adult Beena who is coming to terms with Sadhana's shocking death. When she returns to Montreal with her son, Quinn, to clean out her late sister's apartment and, fittingly, 'purge' Sadhana's belongings, Beena experiences and shares flashbacks of her childhood, young adulthood, and the time shortly before Sadhana's passing. Despite sharing a tumultuous relationship with Sadhana, Beena feels as if she has lost a limb in the death of her younger sister: "I had to explain the unexplainable—that my younger sister had died of a heart attack at age thirty-two. That she had spent half of her life starving herself, or trying not to. That after the funeral we had flung her ashes into the St. Lawrence River, and part of me had been scattered then, too" (Nawaz 11). Despite their age difference, the two sisters are born on the same day. Moreover, after the death of their parents, Beena takes on a mothering role

to Sadhana, and spends what feels like her entire childhood and young adulthood nursing Sadhana through her struggles with anorexia and mental illness. So, when Sadhana dies of a heart attack, undoubtedly due to the strain caused by years of malnutrition and starvation, Beena is left unsure of her role in this new world without her sister. This loss haunts Beena, and reminds her of the times that she watched her sister disappear even when she was alive: “If Sadhana’s a ghost, I haven’t seen her. I haven’t spotted any signs of her shading my footsteps or tracing my name across a rain-soaked window. In a way, though, I’m not surprised. I spent so many years watching her disappear, little by little, that it is impossible for me to believe that there could be any of her left over” (Nawaz 12). Beena realizes that, aside from her son and her uncle, she no longer has a tangible connection to her parents, or to the sister that became her only close familial bond in the wake of Papa and Mama’s deaths.

Unquestionably, both Sadhana and Beena’s relationship to food and the maintenance of their bodies alters and deteriorates after the death of their parents when the sisters are children. During their adolescence, Mama and Papa teach the girls to view food as not only nourishment, but also as a channel through which people can bond, heal, and find comfort. In particular, Mama suggests that food provides the very essence of life, and for that, the sisters should exhibit celebration and gratitude: “Mama made us smell everything she bought. One time, when I exclaimed over an apple, she told me to take a bite. ‘Whenever you eat,’ she told me, putting one into my hand, ‘you should remember to be happy to be alive’” (Nawaz 393). Throughout their early childhood, Sadhana and Beena share home-cooked meals with their mother at the dinner table each

night, and, similarly, eat breakfast together in their pyjamas at the table each morning. This ritualistic sharing of and caring about food extends into memories of their father, Papa, who dies of a heart attack downstairs in the family bagel shop when Beena is five years old and Sadhana is three. He establishes the family tradition of taking *hukams*—reading holy passages to begin the family’s day—after breakfast, and he takes a *hukam* on the morning of his passing:

On the morning everything changed, August twenty-first, 1978, Papa announced his intention to take a *hukam* from the Guru Granth Sahib, the big holy book compiled in the age of the gurus. He often did this after breakfast, opening to a passage at random to give us insight into the day to come. Sadhana and I watched from the kitchen table with near fanatic joy we always reserved for family rituals. [...] The first letters of our names were chosen from the first letter of special *hukams* taken after we were born. (Nawaz 20)

In the final moments of his life, and even in his passing, Papa inextricably ties himself to the nourishment of his family’s both physical and spiritual health. This food ritual not only solidifies his cultural pride and religious faith, but it also strengthens his family unit as they come together and show love for one another through food.

As such, after Papa’s passing, Mama maintains this relationship with her children to remind them of why they should take pride in both their bodies and their heritage.

Born in India to Sikh parents, Papa takes on the trade of baking when he moves to Canada, and he and his brother, whom the sisters refer to as Uncle, open and run a bagel shop in Montreal. Conversely, the girls’ mother, Mama, possesses automatic privilege in Canada as a result of her whiteness. Born to American parents in Galway, Ireland, Mama converts to the Sikh faith upon marrying Papa and works as a yoga instructor for the duration of the sisters’ adolescence. Consequently, Papa, Mama, and their daughters

embrace eastern approaches to food; for the Singh family, this lifestyle means that food is not a merely biological necessity, nor is it an inconvenience. The preparation, consuming, and sharing of food serves as a channel through which people can express and gift each other with affection. After Papa dies, Mama preserves his memory, and he lives on through the food that she and her daughters share. For example, the act of baking a cake allows the family to process their grief over the loss of Papa, and also to revive him spiritually: “‘Papa always said you could bake love right into something,’ said Mama with wonder in her eyes, scraping her fork along the side of the flowered china plate. ‘He said you could taste the difference.’ [...] When we finished making the cake and sat down to eat it, it seemed to have a little something of him in it” (Nawaz 27). Similarly, Mama defines Papa himself as a comforting source of nourishment, and tells the girls that he always smelled “like flour [...] and eucalyptus, and the sweetness of chopped basil” (Nawaz 27-8). Papa’s ties to the food that he prepares in the bagel shop until his death are essential to his personhood, and also to his position as both a husband and father in the Singh family unit.

However, because the Singhs live in the systemically-white world of Montreal, their connection to the bagel shop is racially coded and limited to stereotypical constructions of multiculturalism. In a 2018 interview with Sadiya Ansari for *The Globe and Mail*, Black Canadian writer Dionne Brand asserts that corporate conceptions of “diversity” do not allow for a true freedom of selfhood. These interpretations of “inclusion,” Brand argues, are simply a way for institutions to “‘add some here and there’ while the underlying power structures remain intact” (Ansari 2018). Unless it fits into

what Brand describes as corporate “brackets or boxes” (Ansari 2018; quoting Brand) of acceptable racial stereotypes and practices, any physical difference, like race, threatens the white Canadian ‘norm.’ Similarly, Papa and his brother, whom the sisters call “Uncle,” are limited in the ways in which they can express their Indian heritage in a Canadian context. For example, the brothers are aware that, as two Sikh men, financial success and stability in Montreal can be found through the food and service industry (as a result of systemic and economic racism in Canada). Consequently, the brothers open a bagel shop in order to survive in their new country. As the brothers demonstrate, for first generation immigrants in Canada, the process of identity formation is frequently limited to narrow definitions of ethnicity. Nawaz clearly distinguishes between the “American tourists” and the “bona fide bagel customers” (Nawaz 146); to the white tourists in Montreal, it does not matter that the men who make their bagels possess no Jewish heritage. Instead, merely the fact that they are consuming a quintessentially ‘multicultural’ food is satisfactory.

Though she, like many of bagel shop customers, is white, Mama works tirelessly to help her daughters love and appreciate their unique, feminine,¹⁸ and mixed-race bodies. Albeit from a position of white privilege, Mama embraces eastern cultures and traditions. She works as a yoga instructor, and she practices yoga and meditates for two hours each morning. Furthermore, Mama is incredibly spiritual; she regularly participates in spiritual cleanses, discusses the spirits of animals, and emphasizes the importance of a

¹⁸ Mama invokes an essentialist form of femininity. In her interactions with her daughters, Mama celebrates bodies that are born anatomically female.

spiritual connection to the earth and the natural world. As a consequence, she appeals to her daughters' biology, and insists that menstruation should be a source of pride rather than shame. When Beena first menstruates, Mama decides to celebrate the milestone: "When I got my period for the first time, Mama baked a spice cake of cinnamon and cloves, its batter tinted red with the juice of crushed beets. I was eleven and ambivalent, but it was a luxury to have a celebration of my own for once, something besides the usual mutual birthdays" (Nawaz 58). Similarly, when Sadhana begins bleeding, Mama wishes to bake a cake and call attention to Sadhana's transition to 'womanhood.' However, Sadhana is more reluctant than Beena, and asks that her mother refrain from celebrating. Mama complies, but reasserts the importance of celebrating the menstruating body: "Mama had already measured the flour and the sugar into a bowl, but she didn't complain. 'As long as you don't feel any shame,' she said. 'I want to you know this is a beautiful, joyful thing'" (Nawaz 62). Significantly, Mama goes so far as to go out of her way to synchronize her menstrual cycle with those of her daughters, and forges, as Kamal Al-Solaylee asserts in a review of *Bone and Bread* for *Quill & Quire*, a "physical and psychic connection" (Al-Solaylee, *Quill & Quire*) between the otherwise unlike sisters. In a world without Papa, Mama is the glue that holds Beena and Sadhana together—both as a collective, and also as autonomous, independent individuals.

However, as the girls age, they become increasingly aware of the racial difference between themselves and their mother, and of the persistent gaze of white Canadians. Beena and Sadhana actively seek ways to connect themselves to their mother that exist beyond physical appearances:

With Papa gone, we forgot that Mama's part in us couldn't really be seen, that people [...] would always be inclined to ask questions. That may have been when we began searching, hunting for more parts of ourselves that took after her, parts we could show the world to prove we were her daughters. Something to go along with everything from Papa that we couldn't hide. (Nawaz 57)

Through food, the sisters find a way to forge themselves to the aspects of their mother and her history that are not visible on the skin. For example, when Mama catches Sadhana and Beena, aged 11 and 13, with a bottle of tequila, the sisters divert their mother's reprimands by asking her about her family history and how it has shaped her current eating practices. Through this emotional conversation, it becomes clear that, though Mama is now a vegetarian, she longs for her own mother's non-vegetarian cooking:

Mama looked thoughtful. "I miss roast chicken like my mother used to make."
"What did it taste like?" asked Sadhana.
"Heaven," said Mama, closing her eyes.
"But you don't eat animals anymore."
"That bird," said Mama. "Maybe that one bird, I would." (Nawaz 66-7)

In this moment, Sadhana and Beena come to understand Mama as an individual who not only existed autonomously before their birth, but as someone who continues to be influenced and impacted by her history. These meal-time and food-centred discussions open up Mama's daughters to aspects of their history that shape them—despite being invisible. Similarly, items such as a cup of tea come to serve as the vessel through which this storytelling manifests: "Whenever [Mama] made her spiced tea after breakfast, she began to tell us stories about her parents" (Nawaz 74). Moreover, in keeping with Sadhana's request, Mama reinstates the *hukam* family tradition at the breakfast table. While their father may be gone, for Beena and Sadhana, these intimate and gustatorily-

centred moments with their mother legitimize their identities and allow them to feel a part of a greater picture of the family lineage.

As a result, Beena and Sadhana decide to actively participate in the cultivation of family tradition through food and recipes, and, in an effort to recreate their mother's food memories, attempt to make the roast chicken that Mama's mother used to make. The sisters understand their mother's nostalgia and yearning for her family: "The chicken in its ideal form, the sense memory as described by our mother, might have loomed even larger than our grandparents in our collective mythology. 'At least missing something means you remember it,' said Sadhana" (Nawaz 75). The cooking of the chicken becomes a way not only to connect to their mother, but also to care for her and comfort her in the same way that she nurtures them. Beena describes the chicken as a "cheering-up meal" (Nawaz 75), and deliberately notes that the idea to cook the meal is initially hers. When Mama returns home from her retreat, the sensory experience in the apartment is overwhelming and other-worldly: "'It smells so good in here,' said Mama once she got inside. 'I must be dreaming'" (Nawaz 76). The daughters are desperate for Mama's approval of their recreation of the recipe, and refuse to speak or eat until she has taken her first bite. Yet, after Mama tastes the chicken and exclaims that it is "delicious" (Nawaz 76), she begins to cough and choke. However, the daughters believe Mama is pretending, and once they finally realize the gravity of the situation, it is as if Mama is already dead: "Her coughs became almost soundless. Little ghosts of coughs" (Nawaz 76). In this moment, Beena realizes that, while she may be able to reciprocate her mother's love, she will never be able to replicate it, and that in moments

where she is without it, she desperately needs her mother's guidance: "We didn't know what to do if someone was choking. I'm not sure we even knew what choking was" (Nawaz 77). Unfortunately, the last memory Beena and Sadhana share with their mother is traumatic, chaotic, and devastating.

At the hospital, Sadhana and Beena learn that their mother has died from choking on the chicken she consumes. Beena feels immediate guilt and remorse, and blames herself for her mother's passing: "'I thought she was coughing,' I told Sadhana over and over afterwards. 'Just coughing.' At the hospital they told us that a bone from the chicken had become trapped in her airway. They told us she was dead" (Nawaz 77). Through this traumatic event, two young girls, now orphaned, are forced immediately and prematurely into adulthood. Despite being a young, high-school aged teenager, Beena contemplates her responsibility for the situation of her mother's death, and understands that this existential turmoil will haunt her and her sister for their entire existences. Mama appears to be unable to 'digest' the loss of her own white family and cuisine. Beena feels guilty for bringing this nostalgia to the surface and being unable to stop the effects of this loss: "Sometimes I thought I could imagine Mama forgiving me for what I'd done or failed to do, but there was no way to explain this to Sadhana. In her, there was no absolution, for herself or me" (Nawaz 77). Beena and Sadhana take responsibility for their mother's death, and they frame it as a murderous situation (albeit accidentally) in which they have "done" (Nawaz 77) something to their mother. Moreover, Beena insists that not only have they have committed a sin by cooking the chicken, but her failure to stop her mother from choking is also a religious crime for which she will never receive forgiveness. The loss of

their mother is their ultimate failure, and in turn, puts both sisters at odds with food, consumption, and their bodies.

Without Mama, the sisters lose all food-related excitement. Food items become either reminders of Mama's traumatic passing, or of the fact that she is no longer present. For example, in adulthood, when browsing the market with Sadhana's girlfriend, Libby, after Sadhana's death, Beena realizes that this is the first time that she has been to the market since the loss of her mother when she was a teenager:

Sadhana and I never went to the market much after Mama died, the place was too full of her, the flip of her orange hair over her shoulder as she looked back at us before leaning in to choose a tomato. The tomatoes themselves, even: the fresh, sweet fullness of them, with a little salt jiggered onto them by the vendors. There were no ripe tomatoes left in a world without Mama. The touch of her hands on every vegetable felt like an initiation into her secret world where ordinary objects could be infused with a kind of goodness based on how well they fulfilled a particular function. (Nawaz 393)

For Awad's Lizzie in *13 Ways of Looking at a Fat Girl*, shopping for groceries at the market with her mother feels like an exercise in restraint. Conversely, in Beena and Sadhana's adolescence, the market is a place where the sisters can bond with their mother while, simultaneously, feeling connected to their late father. For example, when choosing the best leeks to buy, Mama urges the daughters to find the ones that resemble their father: "She got us to hold our fingers up to it to compare the circumferences. We agreed that any leek that looked as thick as Papa's fingers was truly a magnificent vegetable" (Nawaz 393). While the market trips with their mother teach the girls to be excited about food and to appreciate its value, the consumption of food (and lack thereof) after Mama's passing turns into a numbing agent which masks the sisters' painful lack of

a parent. The process of eating becomes decreasingly personal and increasingly transactional and practical. Beena experiences indigestion from a massive change in diet: “Mama’s way of cooking had always leaned to whole grains and stews and lots of vegetables. [...] [After she died,] we ate a lot of bagels from the store, since they were free. My stomach started hurting most of the time” (Nawaz 96). Without Mama, Beena feels a loss of the mindful connection to food that she formerly experienced. Now, out of both financial and practical necessity, food becomes a way to ‘fill’ the body, in a physical sense only.

Conversely, for Sadhana, food develops into an obstacle to overcome in her daily life. It is an impediment to her living a normal life and moving past the loss of her parents. Rather than numb her pain through consumption, she uses the lack thereof to avoid any of the trauma that she has and continues to experience due to the brutal death of her mother. As anthropologist Anna Lavis articulates in her study “Not Eating or Tasting Other Ways to Live: A Qualitative Analysis of ‘Living through’ and Desiring to Maintain Anorexia,”

Anorexia can make it possible to retreat into a numb and protective ‘bubble.’ The illness may thereby offer a way to be in the world that both responds to and ameliorates distress; some individuals describe the ambivalent ‘safety’ of living through their anorexia. As such, food practices are a modality of holding onto anorexia’s valued safety. (Lavis 454)

Through Lavis’ work, Sadhana’s development of anorexia can be understood as triggered by her mother’s death. Lavis furthers her argument by claiming that, for many individuals suffering from anorexia, the desire to become ‘thin’ is not the central issue. In fact, for many living with the illness, being ‘skinny’ is often not even on their radar at all.

Significantly, Sadhana tells Beena that her anorexia does not stem from a preoccupation with appearances:

“It’s just so boring. Wanting to look like a model.”

“And you’re not boring?”

“No.” Sadhana clasped her hands together behind her neck with false insouciance, stretching her boney legs out over the armrest. “I’m an orphan.” She had a look of mingled insolence and rage, a grim scowl topped by a defiant glare. (Nawaz 212)

Sadhana suggests that the pain that she experiences through anorexia and, in turn, inflicts upon Beena is a direct result of their being orphaned. Moreover, as Lavis’s research suggests, anorexia may, in fact, be Sadhana’s way of relating to a world without her mother: “Anorexia may simultaneously feel profoundly painful and yet also be integral to getting through, and remaining in, the world” (Lavis 467). Even though the anorexia is, in itself, harmful, it also aids Sadhana in her attempt to exist in the world as a child without parents.

Being skinny is not the ultimate goal, but merely a gauge through which Sadhana can measure anorexia’s presence in her life. As Lavis suggests, for individuals with anorexia, thinness may be a powerful and comforting reminder of anorexia’s, and therefore, its victim’s survival: “If not eating maintains anorexia, and emaciation allows it to be reassuringly measured through the body, the weight gain of treatment may be experienced as a profound loss. This is made more acute because recovery so often entails confronting the traumatic life experiences that initially necessitated anorexia’s ‘helpful’ numbness” (Lavis 467-8). Similarly, Sadhana not only fears weight gain, but also food and reminders of food themselves. After being diagnosed with anorexia,

Sadhana tells Beena that she would be more inclined to eat if she did not have to prepare the food herself. Beena thus becomes a quasi-mother figure to Sadhana, and feeds and nurtures her sister in an attempt to heal her. However, for Sadhana, eating means that she is failing to maintain her anorexia, which she views as a source of relative comfort.

Beena notes that getting Sadhana to eat is a convoluted process:

I shopped and cooked and put a plate down in front of her and talked her ear off until she'd eaten enough to leave the table. I got used to the sight of her crying and chewing, silently, as I made my efforts to distract her. [...] Sadhana couldn't eat if anyone was watching her, and yet someone had to be there or she wouldn't eat at all. (Nawaz 236)

Sadhana grapples with the fact that her survival and her anorexia's survival struggle to exist simultaneously. In other words, Sadhana feels that she is surviving, and not dying, in a world without her mother through the numbing agent of her anorexia. Furthermore, Beena also suggests that Sadhana does not want to die: "Over the years, even as her body wasted and she refused food, Sadhana always claimed she didn't want to die. Mostly, I had believed her" (Nawaz 122). But, in order to actually stay alive, Sadhana needs to eat, creating a fundamental contradiction between her desire to stay alive and her refusal to consume a reasonable amount of food.

This battle, as Beena suggests, stems from a much larger issue of mental illness that predates Sadhana's diagnosis with anorexia. After a fire that is started at the bagel shop by neo-Nazis shortly after her father's passing, Sadhana begins to exhibit signs of paranoia and anxiety. For example, even though the fire was started by a gas-soaked towel that the neo-Nazis stuffed through the mail slot, Sadhana becomes preoccupied

with the oven in the family apartment, and frequently fears that it has been left on. One night, Beena catches Sadhana out of bed and standing at the stove:

“What are you doing?”

“Checking to make sure it’s off,” she said. She was on her tiptoes, waving one hand in a kind of rhythm over the dials as she used the other to grip the stove. She was leaning in so closely I could see the oven handle digging into her stomach.

“We didn’t even use it tonight,” I said. “Of course it’s turned off.”

“No,” said Sadhana. “No, no. We have to be more careful. We don’t want another fire.”

“Okay, so it’s off,” I said. I decided not to point out that the fire hadn’t started with the stove, anyway. It occurred to me that Sadhana had been out of bed for a long time. “Let’s go back to sleep.”

Sadhana looked at me then, and I could see that she was crying, her cheeks streaked with the tally of her misery’s duration. “I can’t,” she said. “Every time I try and leave, I start worrying that I’ve done it wrong, and I have to check it again.” (Nawaz 37)

Even as a child, Beena understands the severity of Sadhana’s anxieties, and watches her mother care for her sister. Beena describes her mother’s hyper-vigilance towards Sadhana’s anxieties and compulsions as a sort of all-knowing magic: “Mama watched Sadhana the way she watched the balcony basil, the only one of our herbs in perpetual danger from the neighbour’s seemingly Italian cat. Though I rarely caught her looking at it, she always knew when it needed water, when it needed shade, when it had been bitten ragged and needed to come back inside” (Nawaz 39). After Mama’s death, it is up to Beena to take on the role of mothering her younger sister. However, as Beena notes, she is never as effective at caring for Sadhana as Mama once was, and the relationship between the two sisters becomes defined by resentment and is haunted by past traumas that are never fully resolved.

In *Gut Feminism*, Elizabeth A. Wilson explores connections between trauma and the gut, and argues that sociological trauma affects digestion, eating, and the nutritive process. Wilson claims that mental illnesses, such as depression, are not isolated to the brain, but extend into the rest of the body and affect its functioning:

I want to show how some biological and pharmacological data about depression help us think about minded states as enacted not just by the brain but also by the distributed network of nerves that innervates the periphery (especially the gut). My argument is not that the gut contributes to minded states, but that the gut is an organ of mind: it ruminates, deliberates, comprehends. (195)

Sadhana lives through the trauma of losing her father unexpectedly, of having her apartment set on fire by neo-Nazis, of first experiencing mental illness at a young age, and of witnessing her mother's painful death; of course, her body experiences and responds to this extensive suffering. Wilson articulates that even Sigmund Freud¹⁹ was forming connections between anorexia and "melancholia," and that gut issues can be perceived as bodily translations of mental trauma. Wilson furthers this to suggest that these instances of organ 'speech' are bodily utterances and responses to grief and trauma; while they are non-verbal speech acts, they are notable responses nonetheless.

The psychoanalytic connections between the gut and trauma are heavily rooted in Freud's writings on "conversion hysteria." As Wilson notes, Freud wrote that psychic conflict and emotional turmoil is transformed and converted into physical symptoms—hence the term "conversion hysteria." Consequently, trauma, such as that which Beena

¹⁹ In *Gut Feminism*, Wilson states that Freud was conscious of this mind and body connection: "Freud had been aware of a connection between gut and depression [...]. In a draft on melancholia in 1892, he notes the close relationship between disordered mood and disordered eating" (Wilson 1423).

and Sadhana endure, and even the familial loss that Mama experiences, manifests in somatic symptoms, such as paralysis, pain, numbness, physical illness, and digestion issues. While Mama's choking on chicken may highlight her inability to digest the loss of her white culture and cuisine, Beena and Sadhana inherit a similar form of indigestion. They struggle to digest their own innumerable familial and cultural losses. Certainly, Freud's association between digestion and trauma still holds significance today for all individuals who suffer loss in some form. Not only is present day trauma, such as the loss of a loved one, closely related to food and changes in eating habits (note the significance of funeral food and bringing home-cooked meals to the bereaved), but people continue to associate trauma and loss with metaphorical digestion. In discussions of pain and suffering, trauma and loss are phenomena that are to be "digested" and processed in order to heal and move on.²⁰

Wilson elucidates that the conventional divide between culture and nature in discussions of mental and bodily responses to trauma is insufficient for discussions of anorexia and disordered eating. While her work is influenced by Freud's conversion hysteria, it does not negate the anatomical body. It is important to note that Wilson occasionally conflates 'anatomy' with 'biology,' and, to maintain precision, I focus on the anatomical 'parts' of the body rather than the authoritative discipline of 'Biology' itself.

²⁰ As Wilson articulates, "This model of hysteria, and Freud's emerging preference for psychogenic explanations over neurological ones, has been enormously influential on feminist accounts of embodiment" (Wilson 923). As a consequence, this allowed feminists, predominantly those of the 80s and 90s, to move away from anatomy and ideas of biological determinism to instead focus on socio-cultural factors that influence women's lives and wellbeing.

Nevertheless, while feminists currently avoid discussions of anatomy to instead focus on ideas of social constructionism, Wilson articulates that incorporating the body with culture is necessary to understand the ways in which bodies respond to external sources of pain and suffering:

Anatomy enacts the kinds of malleability, heterogeneity, friction, and unpredictability that feminist theories can relish. [...] I want to show that anatomy is volatile enough to generate multifaceted and paradoxical destinies. Rather than turning away from anatomy, we could turn toward it more attentively to see what improbable capacities it holds. (Wilson 871-6)

Wilson claims that there is an unknowability to the body's responses to grief and trauma. Sometimes, our body acts ahead of our mind, and our mind cannot comprehend the unpredictable ways in which the body works or, similarly, fails to work in the wake of mental suffering. Our bodies sometimes know us better than we do. As Wilson would suggest, Sadhana's disordered eating is less of an agential "choice," and more of an act of organ speech through which the body and the mind simultaneously respond to outside stimuli and sources of trauma.

The trauma of losing Mama lies at the root of the Sadhana's struggle with mental illness and disordered eating, and, as a consequence, fuels the extreme disconnect between Beena and Sadhana. The two sisters who once shared meals, market trips, and menstrual cycles with each other and their mother find themselves in a position of permanent strain; for Beena, this feels as if Sadhana blames her older sister for the death of their mother. Certainly, the novel is filtered through Beena's perspective and bias, and it is difficult to know whether or not Sadhana truly possesses disdain towards Beena, or if her hostility towards her older sister is merely an outward expression of her struggle with

mental illness. However, for Beena, Sadhana's animosity toward her sister is a direct affront to the very familial connections that both her mother and father enforced during their childhood. After Mama dies, Sadhana begins avoiding Beena at school, and pretends to be unrelated to her older sister. Most harmful to Beena, though, is that Sadhana's retorts to Beena's attempts at sisterly connection are cold, malicious, and fatphobic. Beena feels as if her every move is a nuisance to her younger sister, and, upon secretly reading Sadhana's diary, she discovers that her behaviours make her outright loathsome to the sister she once saw as her confidante: "All of these might as well have been crimes against humanity from the way they were described in the pages of my sister's diary. As a result, I was deemed a jerk, a show-off, a total fashion disaster. When I read *Beena's face is so fat it looks like a pecan pie*, I had to snap it shut before my tears could mar the ink" (Nawaz 117). Similarly, after Beena becomes pregnant by one of the bagel shop workers, Ravi, she is further subjected to both Sadhana and Sadhana's school friends' ridicule:

She ignored me at school and only raised an eyebrow when her friend Priya said I was getting even fatter than before. [...] She rarely deigned to sit down with us for dinner, claiming the very sight of me put her off her food. When she did, she would pass me the bread along with a look of critical disgust. "Eating for two is just a figure of speech, you know, Beena." (Nawaz 151)

Under Sadhana's cruelty, Beena is turned into the very foodstuffs that she consumes, becoming a grotesque, unnatural, and disgusting counterpart to her thin, pristine, and popular sister.

For Sadhana, her rejection of food and her perception of 'dirtiness' offer ways through which she can maintain orderliness, and, therefore, reclaim control over her life,

which has been steeped in chaos, pain, and disorder. Even after Sadhana's death, Beena and her son, Quinn, are careful to remove their shoes while cleaning Sadhana's apartment because they know that she would not want her living space to be dirtied or disorganized. Beena articulates that, in her later years, Sadhana would begin cleaning the kitchen before everyone had even finished their meals:

Housekeeping, for Sadhana, was something manic. She would get up while Quinn and I were still eating dinner, taking an abrasive yellow sponge to the dishes she'd used, donning elbow-high blue rubber gloves and a severe focus. She'd rinse and stack any takeout packages or pizza boxes, refrigerate leftovers, and wash and moisturize her hands, all while Quinn and I sat eating, making alternating and desultory attempts to win back her attention. (Nawaz 81)

Unlike during their childhood, where the dinner table was a place to come together as a family and share meals and stories, Sadhana views family mealtimes as oppressive, exhausting, and anxiety provoking. Instead of calmly enjoying a meal with her sister and nephew, she immediately rises after eating and rids herself of any trace of her dinner. Moreover, she feels stifled by Beena's constant scrutiny, and in turn, shifts her gaze outward to retaliate. Beena articulates that when she tries to watch Sadhana's weight, Sadhana lashes out and judges her older sister for being heavier: "She had cleared her plate before I'd had time to judge how much she'd eaten. [...] At last she came back to the table, narrowing her eyes at the rest of my buttered roll" (Nawaz 81). To Sadhana, despite having anorexia, it is truly Beena who is 'disordered'; because Beena is not as 'disciplined' as Sadhana, she is dismissed as the larger, lazier, and less conventionally 'pretty' sister.

While Sadhana seems more focused on food disgust than thin prioritization, she is judgmental and fatphobic towards her sister, and projects her own food judgment onto others. Sadhana's fatphobic gaze toward her sister develops into, what Beena perceives to be, an intense judgment on Beena's ability to mother her son, Quinn. As Sadhana's behaviour suggests, being a thin mom makes you a healthy mom, a better parent, and abler to care for your child. This perpetuates what Cressida J. Heyes, in her article "Foucault Goes to Weight Watchers," describes as a false connection between weight and health. Heyes states that, in a western context, almost everyone is seen as being "too fat" (Heyes 128), and it is culturally believed that losing weight 'benefits' the health of fat's innumerable victims. As Heyes explains, this rhetoric is particularly damaging to women—especially to those who are mothers: "Losing weight makes one into both a new person with new capacities, and a conventionally better caregiver and mother" (Heyes 142). Sadhana becomes a second mother and an alternative parent figure to Quinn, and refers to him as "that kid of ours" (Nawaz 4) when in conversation with Beena. Paradoxically, Quinn looks more like Sadhana than he does Beena, and Sadhana encourages this connection. Beena appears occasionally threatened by this: "He is thinner than me, and darker, with Sadhana's deep liveliness of expression and grace of movement. [...] For his birthday last year, Sadhana bought him a gym membership" (Nawaz 2). Certainly, Beena supports this aunt and nephew relationship; however, it becomes clear that, in decisions regarding parenting, Sadhana holds judgment over her sister's relationship to her own body. Sadhana seems to suggest that dieting allows her to care of herself and resist patriarchy—unlike Beena, who is a teen mother

with a runaway 'baby daddy.' In her discussion of weight loss programming, Heyes notes that dieting is contemporarily viewed as a way that women can 'reclaim' their bodies from the grip of masculine control: "Dieting is equated with taking care of oneself in the face of the gendered exploitation that characterizes many women's lives. Balancing the often culturally prescribed care of others with more attentive, and prior, care of the self is something that a Foucauldian feminist might well recommend" (Heyes 143). Of the two sisters, Sadhana views herself on the moral, 'feminist' high ground, and, consequently, as a better influence on Quinn.

However, when in the throes of her anorexia, Sadhana's parenting skills are limited, and she is often unable to care for Quinn's nutritional needs. For example, during an evening gathering at her new apartment, Sadhana sets up a bed for Quinn in her notably empty pantry while adults drink and party just outside the door. When Quinn is hungry, there is, in fact, no 'healthy food' in the apartment to feed him; all Sadhana has is a can of soup and a box of Fig Newtons. Upon opening the fridge, Beena is alarmed to notice that her sister has relapsed and is, once again, not eating enough to stay alive: "The inside [of the fridge] was crammed with beer and other booze, a handful of lemons and limes, and an opened box of baking soda. I couldn't help but notice there was no trace of food besides the leftovers from the hors d'oeuvres" (Nawaz 307). Unfortunately, in her rejection of food, Sadhana becomes so disconnected from the idea of eating that she forgets that it is a necessary process for the survival of her family members. She chastises Beena for feeding Quinn 'unhealthy food,' and claims that Beena would be to blame for her son's potential fatness: "She warned me that I was in danger of making us all fat, that

Quinn would never be weaned off a taste for junk food. She meant me, too, but she didn't say it" (Nawaz 327). Sadhana positions fat as something that, like food, is to be avoided.

In "Slender Trouble: From Berlant's Cruel Figuring of Figure to Sedgwick's Fat Presence," Lucas Crawford argues that, in present fatphobic discourses surrounding fatness and body weight, fatness is never viewed in the present tense. Instead, fatness is positioned as something that needs to be gotten rid of, or as something that has already been eliminated:

Despite and because of all the time spent on fat in the past two decades, there is, rhetorically, no such thing as a fat present—or, therefore, fat presence. When fat bodies can be permitted only if they can "pass as on-the-way-to-thin" (LeBesco 2004: 95), it is not even possible to say that anyone *is* fat; fat people are launched into the future anterior tense in which we "will have been" fat. (Crawford 448)

Sadhana suggests that, like herself, Quinn should eat carefully to avoid the potential of becoming fat like his mother. Through this rhetoric, Sadhana concomitantly implies that Beena should lose weight in order to become 'healthier.' However, as Crawford suggests, this, paradoxically, implies that fat people are both on "borrowed time" (448) and also "timeless" (448). While the time of fat people is always running out as a result of their 'need' to become thin, they are, simultaneously, always defined by their fat or lack thereof. As Sadhana persistently gazes upon her Beena's relationship with food, and consequently, Quinn's, she falsely equates and conflates health and weight, and, therefore, dehumanizes and renders her sister's fat 'abject.' Heyes explains that, "people diet because they act on false beliefs about the possibility and desirability of losing

weight for the sake of their health” (Heyes 126). Sadhana positions Quinn’s diet and thinness, or, in other words, non-fatness, as Beena’s responsibility.

Through this cold, calculated, and diet-based relationship to food, Sadhana prioritizes ‘health’ over nourishment, and suggests that the act of finding pleasure or satisfaction in food is sinful and shameful. In a group therapy session with Quinn and Beena, Sadhana recalls the night that her mother died, she ate a Mars bar at the hospital:

My sister got sentimental about candy bars after we went back to therapy, and [the therapist] regarded it as a breakthrough. [...] ‘When was the last time you remember having one?’

‘When our mother had to go to the hospital,’ said Sadhana. ‘The night she died.’ She was looking at the floor, where she was drawing an arc around her chair leg with the toe of her black flat. ‘I got it out of the vending machine.’

‘What else?’

‘Well, we weren’t allowed to have candy normally, but we were so hungry and we’d been there for hours. I remember it was the best thing I had ever tasted, and I felt so guilty that I cried when I was finished.’

‘What did you feel guilty about?’

‘Breaking the rules. And being glad about it.’

‘You saw it was a betrayal of your mother’s values.’

Sadhana nodded. ‘Maybe.’ She talked at length about unwrapping it, the crinkle of the paper and the smooth brown form of the bar, which made me smirk. And about the first bite, how she expected it to be heavy but it was light, how it melted on her tongue. (Nawaz 335-6)

For Sadhana, the act of consuming the Mars bar does not bring comfort or even nourishment, but is, instead, an affront to her mother’s memory. Ironically, even though Mama taught her daughters to love and cherish the human connection to food, Sadhana feels as if she does not deserve to find pleasure in food when her mother has just died because of what she ate. In describing the sensual experience of consuming the candy bar, Sadhana feels as if she is reliving a past sin. Similarly, in her article “Fat, Syn, and Disordered Eating: The Dangers and Powers of Excess,” Hannah Bacon argues that

weight-loss programs and diet cultures promote the idea that finding pleasure in food is sinful, and that the arbitrary coding of certain foods as “good” and “bad” induces shame: “It is the *pleasure* of food and eating which is especially dangerous. [...] Eating the “wrong” foods, then, is not sensible because these are not foods we *need*, they are foods we eat for pleasure in excess of what we need and they are foods which hook us with their taste” (11). Sadhana codes the Mars bar as “wrong” because she believes it to be a decadent and indulgent food.

Not only does Sadhana feel shame about the pleasurable and unhealthy candy bar, but she also feels guilty for an apparent “betrayal” (Nawaz 335) of her mother’s values. However, Beena has apprehensions about the therapist’s narrativization of Sadhana’s shame, and suggests that Sadhana’s illness does not align with their mother’s love for food and life. Certainly, it seems unlikely that Mama, a woman who taught her daughters to nourish and love their bodies and souls, would ever shame Sadhana for eating a ‘bad’ food in a time of need. Moreover, as Mama’s behaviour throughout the girls’ childhood suggests, candy is not “bad,” but can be, instead, a fun “treat” reserved for special family occasions. What appears to be at work in this passage with Sadhana’s illness appears to be more sinister, and may be derived from a culture where foods, and, therefore, the people who eat them, are coded as “bad” or “good.” As Hannah Bacon argues, the western association between “fat” and “sin” has both biblical and classical connotations, and can be sourced from individuals like Saint Jerome: “Apparently, the less flesh we have, the more we become like the heavenly bodies who have none. [...] Fat is assumed to be a physical sign of Syn and visible proof of a body which has become

disordered” (3). Because many North Americans view food pleasure as sinful and morally wrong, it becomes difficult for young Sadhana to escape these feelings without her mother there to guide her. For Sadhana, the issue does not lie in Mama’s inability shame her for eating a candy bar; instead, the real, painful reality of this parentless situation is that Mama cannot be not there to comfort Sadhana or affirm her decisions and behaviours.

Until Sadhana’s passing, Beena lives under the impression that Sadhana is unlike Mama, and needs to be mothered by Beena in order to survive. However, after moving to Ottawa with Quinn, Beena discovers that Sadhana remained in Montreal to blossom into a nearly unrecognizable and independent human being. Upon meeting Sadhana’s girlfriend, Libby, Beena comes to realize that her sister’s relationship with food has changed: “[Libby’s] stories have a narrative quality that casts Sadhana as a character I no longer recognize. There is Sadhana the gourmet, who had Libby over first for drinks, then sushi, then cassoulet, and later for dinners lasting late into the evening.” (Nawaz 290) Beena also discovers that Sadhana was an active member of the Montreal community, and regularly gave back to undocumented immigrant families. In particular, before her death, Sadhana cooked food for the Essaid family, whose patriarch, Bassam Essaid, is under threat of deportation by the Canadian government. Beena is shocked to discover that her anorexic sister, who once feared cooking food for herself, takes on the initiative of keeping an immigrant family fed. Even in the throes of her illness, Sadhana never truly lost her mother’s love for sharing food and creating bonds through nourishment and community. Beena visits the Essaids after Sadhana dies, and instantly feels connected to

both her sister and her mother through the hospitality of Bassam's wife, Marwo: "She pours a little into a cup for me to taste, and it is sweet and milky. It reminds me of Mama's spiced tea except that I can taste pepper" (Nawaz 286). Through her newfound connection with Libby and the Essaid family, Beena comes to love and view her late sister as someone with giving and motherly qualities. Beena even embraces Quinn as the product of both her and Sadhana: "He is my son, mine and Sadhana's, and I am glad that he is clever and full of doubt and sees me more clearly for who I am than as simply the woman who is his mother" (Nawaz 444). Beena can now see both herself and her sister as mother figures who inherited their own mother's nurturing relationship to food and family. With that legacy in place, Beena can move on from perceiving herself, necessarily, as Sadhana's keeper, and let go of the emotional strains imposed by that responsibility.

At the novel's close, Nawaz suggests that this healing already begins to take place for Beena. After a protest held outside of Bassam Essaid's court hearing, Beena, Quinn, Quinn's girlfriend, Caro, and a group of protestors return to a household gathering to celebrate the Essaid family escaping deportation and being permitted to stay in Montreal. During the party, Beena becomes famished, and, like her mother once taught her, realizes through her hunger that she is alive: "We tear off pieces of bread with our hands and scoop the peanut butter on top. The first bite reveals to me my own hunger, and the second tells me something else, that I am alive. That I am here in a kitchen with my son, and we are eating together and we are alive. And the work of getting closer, of loving harder, is the work of a whole life" (Nawaz 445). By sharing this intimate moment in the

kitchen with her son, Beena feels reconnected to both her mother and her sister, and realizes that both she and Sadhana share more of their mother's traits than she ever could have realized:

“If [Mama] were here [...] she probably would have baked a cake in the shape of a courthouse or filled the whole house with balloons. She was never afraid of throwing herself into things.” Mama's courage was where our inheritance went astray. The trust she had in her own choices, to follow without doubt the call of her heart, wherever it might lead. Instead of doing whatever else might have been expected. Choosing to be free, choosing to always be choosing, never following. Choosing everything instead of being or seeing only one thing or another.
(Nawaz 444)

Sadhana's skepticism, intensity, and free-spirited nature, Beena realizes, are what truly make her Mama's daughter. Perhaps, the trauma of Mama's death does not need to define and sever the sisters' relationship. Instead, Mama's voracity, zest for life, and ability to care for those in the midst of chaos can bring the two sisters together despite racism, familial loss, and trauma—even after Sadhana's death. Because Beena is out of touch with her sister in the final months of Sadhana's life, she cannot know whether or not Sadhana was eating and undertaking her own healing. Nonetheless, while Sadhana dies before she can heal alongside Beena and digest her trauma and loss, Beena makes conscious effort to do so on behalf of both of them.

Through its depiction of food's ability to sever, create, and restore familial connections, Saleema Nawaz's *Bone and Bread* highlights the healing and productive nature of positive food feelings. While this familial rebuilding takes place after Sadhana's death, *Bone and Bread* optimistically suggests that food, nourishment, and community can help to soothe the painful wounds of loss and trauma. Nawaz movingly depicts the

toil that anorexia, eating disorders, and mental illness take not only on their victims, but also the loved ones that surround them. Through this work, she humanizes diverse body types by highlighting the stories that are depicted and told through the body, and also by calling attention to the events and traumas that shape it. By portraying the aftermath of the objectification and dehumanization of women's hunger (particularly for women of colour) Nawaz suggests that normalizing gustatory bonding can allow people to come together and begin to digest their pain. Through Beena, Sadhana, and their late parents, Saleema Nawaz makes satiating hunger and digesting loss a family project, and suggests that while it lasts a lifetime, this hunger should be embraced and cherished. However, because Beena and Sadhana are raised in a positive food environment, Nawaz's nostalgic conclusion begs the question: How can adults experience positive food feelings when they are taught to be ashamed of their bodies as children? Can these feelings be fostered if they never existed to begin with? While Nawaz's *Bone and Bread* may overlook this dimension, as I argue in the following chapter, Tracey Lindberg's *Birdie* provides an example of food 'happiness' entirely created and defined by its protagonist.

CHAPTER 3: The Journey to Self-Discovery: Indigenous Health, Food, and Body Image in Tracey Lindberg's *Birdie*

Cree academic Tracey Lindberg's first creative work, *Birdie*, was released the same year (2015) as the summary of the final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada—a coincidence perhaps, but a significant one. In an interview with Cathy Alex for *CBC News* entitled “Canada Reads: 5 Lessons from *Birdie* author Tracey Lindberg in Thunder Bay,” Lindberg asserts that while this timing was unintentional, it is a testament to “how art can open up the conversation around reconciliation and starting over” (Alex 2016). Lindberg explains that artistic mediums, such as literature, can be more humanizing and empathy-provoking than statistics: “These things are never solved in a courtroom. These things are never solved in a city council room. [...] These things are solved in our kitchens, in our living rooms, [...] Art allows us into other people's bedrooms, other people's kitchens, other people's homes” (Alex 2016; quoting Lindberg). Given this quotation, it is not surprising that quintessentially familial and ‘homey’ locations, such as the bedroom, the living room, and significantly, the kitchen, figure strongly in Lindberg's novel *Birdie*. For Lindberg's Cree protagonist, Bernice (known as Birdie) Meetoos, these environments serve both as the backdrop, and, in the case of the kitchen, also as a catalyst for personal healing. In *Birdie*, Lindberg uses prose and poetry to humanize and highlight Indigenous bodies. Through the character of Birdie, Lindberg questions and counters white and settler-Canadian constructions of health, beauty, and weight. Birdie's story, then, can be read as a direct contrast to

legislation surrounding Indigenous bodies: “Maybe we’ve been too mindful. We’ve been thinking about changing people’s minds and dictating through law and legislation where people go. [...] Maybe it’s actually about changing the way people feel” (Alex 2016; quoting Lindberg). While *Birdie* was released at nearly the same time as the TRC, the “reconciliation” that Lindberg seeks to achieve through her novel differs from that which is portrayed by Canadian media and popular culture; this healing work, Lindberg suggests, begins not at the macro level of government, but on the micro level of the self and the kitchen table.

Although there has been ample popular engagement with Lindberg’s *Birdie* (it was chosen as a Canada Reads finalist in 2016), to date, few literary scholars have explored its significance (see Hanson 2017). However, *Birdie* is a pivotal text not only in its positioning of reconciliation as a personal act, but also in its positioning of health and the body as central forces for Indigenous healing. Following the story of Birdie from childhood into womanhood, Lindberg’s *Birdie* jumps back and forth in time in order to encompass both the trauma and healing that Birdie undergoes as an Indigenous woman in Canada. In an effort to leave her dark secrets behind and to search for a new sense of belonging, Bernice leaves her home just outside of Little Loon First Nation, Alberta, and eventually finds herself working at a bakery owned by a white woman named Lola in Gibsons, British Columbia: “In a way, Gibsons was a tributary branching off the crashing flow of her past. She drifts lazily, some eddy pulling her. She arrived in Gibsons on a gentle tributary off the roar of the river that carried her from Loon to B.C. Was pushed to Lola’s” (Lindberg 18). Once in B.C., Birdie undergoes a “week-long vision

quest” (Keeler 2015) during which she retreats into herself in order to heal. Through this restorative journey, Birdie relives events of her past in order to reconcile herself to her personal history, and also to the historical and colonial forces that have contributed to her exploitation and erasure as a working-class Indigenous woman. Through this second, more internalized, journey, Bernice finds peace with her body—a body that has made her the object of ridicule and harm because she is visibly Other and has gained considerable weight in order to avoid being sexualized. In *Birdie*, Tracey Lindberg uses food and the Indigenous woman’s body to rethink what reconciliation might look like and how it could be undertaken in ways that serve Indigenous communities rather than merely assuaging White guilt.²¹

Instead of exploring reconciliation between victims and abusers, Lindberg uses Birdie’s journey of trauma, healing, and growth to demonstrate the importance of maintaining and revitalizing Cree law, and Indigenous ideas of wellness and health. Birdie’s very existence, both the good and the bad parts of it, is inextricably tied to her

²¹ When expressing their guilt and shame over racism and colonialism, white people still regularly centre themselves. In “White guilt doesn’t help anyone. It’s an unproductive endeavour that simply centres whiteness and is violent to Black and Brown people,” Ayesha Fakie articulates that white guilt perpetuates micro-aggressions against people of colour: “White guilt doesn’t help anyone. At best it is an unproductive endeavour to express it to others, especially people of colour. At worst, it works only to once again centre whiteness and white feelings in discussions about tearing that scourge down. Expressing a sense of white guilt for what was done for whiteness, what is done for whiteness, to the people whiteness continues to oppress may be well intentioned (we hope) but it is yet another affront” (Fakie, *The Institute for Justice and Reconciliation*). White guilt allows white individuals to feel badly without being productive. Fakie highlights that, rather than simply expressing guilt, white people should use their privileges and resources “to actually do something to help dismantle exclusion and oppression” (Fakie, *The Institute for Justice and Reconciliation*).

family and community just outside of Little Loon, Alberta. She carries these pieces of her —that have formed as a result of her interconnectedness to other beings—throughout her journey from Alberta to British Columbia; she is healthy when she and those around her are physically, emotionally, and spiritually at peace. This is because Cree conceptions of health, wellness, and well-being are entirely different from the western ideal of the “healthy body.” In her book *‘Being Alive Well’: Health and the Politics of Cree Well-Being*, medical anthropologist Naomi Adelson illustrates that Cree well-being cannot and should not be understood through “the framework of Western biology” (6). Whereas western conceptions of health prioritize the “disease-free, fit, and youthful body” (6), Cree well-being takes a more holistic approach and moves beyond the physical body:

For the Cree there is no word that translates into English as ‘health.’ The most apt phrase is *miyupimaatisiun* or, as I translate it, ‘being alive well.’ ‘Being alive well’ constitutes what one may describe as being healthy; yet it is less determined by bodily functions than by the practices of daily living and by the balance of human relationships intrinsic to Cree lifestyles. ‘Being alive well’ means that one is able to hunt, to pursue traditional activities, to eat the right foods, and (not surprisingly, given the harsh northern winters) to keep warm. (14-5)

As a consequence, to attempt to understand the well-being of a Cree individual, such as Lindberg’s Birdie, through the framework of western medicine would be misrepresentative. For example, as a fat, Indigenous woman, Birdie’s health cannot be understood merely by her weight and diet, as it depends on the wellness of all beings and relatives surrounding her—including human, animal, and plant life. Indeed, as Adelson asserts, “health has as much to do with social relations, land, and cultural identity as it does with individual physiology” (3). To perceive Birdie and her body through western

biology and beauty ideals would be to ignore the various parts of her that make her a Cree woman.

This dismissal of Indigenous wellness and values, however, has been a longstanding practice since the colonization of what is today known as Canada. In her book *Taking Back Our Spirits: Indigenous Literature, Public Policy, and Healing*, Métis academic and writer Jo-Ann Episknew writes that “the health problems that Indigenous people experience today began with the occupation of their lands” (Episknew 8). Adelson explains that the colonization of Indigenous lands separated Indigenous people from the standards of ‘health’ that they had once lived by and forced them to assimilate and adhere to western sociocultural practices. Unsurprisingly, this proved to be an extremely damaging and genocidal phenomenon for indigenous peoples such as the Cree. While Adelson notes that “warmth, Cree food, and strength form the essence of ‘being alive well’” (62), colonization rendered this impossible. With the arrival of white, European settlers, Indigenous peoples were removed from their lands and separated from the very food sources and homes that they had developed and depended on. They were forced onto undesirable and unsustainable lands, and, as a result, innumerable Indigenous peoples died or suffered from the severe disconnect from their traditions and values. Nutritionally, the impact of colonization was and continues to be devastating.²² Adelson

²² As stated by Dr. Lynden Crowshoe et al. in the *Canadian Journal of Diabetes*, “Indigenous peoples living in Canada are among the highest-risk populations for diabetes and related complications” (S296). Indigenous women and girls of child-bearing age are especially vulnerable, “as the high incidence of hyperglycemia in pregnancy (gestational and type 2) and maternal obesity increases the risk of childhood obesity and diabetes in the next generation” (S296).

writes that, to be alive well, the Cree must have access to “*Iyimiichim*, [...] the food and food products from the land, water, and sky. They are the flesh, fat, and marrow of the animals, fish, and birds of the sub-Arctic” (63). For the Cree, this wildlife is essential to both surviving and thriving. However, as a result of colonization and the imposition of western practices, values, and dietary restrictions, Cree individuals, such as Birdie, have been isolated from the means of maintaining their cultural well-being.

The effects of colonization and, in the same vein, patriarchy, have taken an extreme toll on Birdie and her ability to ‘be alive well.’ Significantly, because their heritage is of mixed Cree and European descent, Bernice and her relatives cannot live on Little Loon First Nation in Alberta, but live—in poverty—just outside of it. Ironically, they are punished for their own colonization by white Europeans; they are deemed to be not ‘Indian enough’ by the Canadian government, and, therefore, “have no reserve, no treaty rights, no health care. No money” (Lindberg 125). Understandably, Birdie and her family internalize this trauma and racial injustice, and this affects their health. In particular, the men in Birdie’s life, her uncles, extend this pain outward and inflict further trauma on the Meetoos women. Birdie herself is on the receiving end; she is sexually assaulted by her uncle, Larry, as a young girl. Lindberg portrays the familial silence surrounding this predatory and dangerous behaviour as an infectious disease that spreads with seeming invisibility:

Why no one stayed with the uncles. The silence about what was happening around them seeped into the kitchen, first. Permeating the curtains. Eating into the linoleum. Eventually settling in the fridge. It was like some sort of bad medicine—it made Freda skinny, Bernice fat, and Maggie disappear. (62)

Birdie herself internalizes this silence, and comes to view herself negatively and shamefully because of it: “Bernice, who found herself difficult to love, had always believed that her mom could not love her. Could not love BigHer. Could not find enough love within her to spread around” (Lindberg 61). Her journey across western Canada is not simply a journey of reconciliation with settler-invader Canada, but is also a journey of reconnection with her body, her body image, and her uncertain sense of self in relation to her family.

Birdie’s relationship with her family members, while full of love, is fraught and often ‘unhealthy.’ As she grows up, Birdie escapes her home life by reading books and hiding in her cubby-hole of a bedroom underneath the staircase. She reads books that contain portraits of the imagined home she longs for:

The perfect book, to Bernice, would depict a clean house with flowers in every available container. There would be no cigarette burns in gaudy-coloured carpet, no empty bottles or glasses half-drunk or spilled on the floor on weekends, and no visits without invitations from her parents’ friends. No one would bother her in her room under the stairs, and she wouldn’t be woken up by thundering feet up the steps (a fight) or the thudding down the stairs (someone falling down). There would be happy shiny people who always hugged and smiled. They would never put each other down or make fun of one another to make other people laugh. (Lindberg 33)

In Birdie’s home, the only bountiful consumption is of alcohol.²³ Nearly every night, she falls asleep to the sound of her mother, her uncles, and her other drunken relatives

²³ Colonialism and racism in Canada are directly to blame for substance use and the rise of mental health issues in Indigenous communities. As Alicia Elliott emphasizes, suicide was quite rare for Indigenous people before European contact. But that has changed; in “2013, suicide and self-inflicted injuries are the leading cause of death for Native people under the age of forty-four. Suicide and depression rates for our people are twice the national average. For Native youth between fifteen and twenty-four, the suicide rate is five to seven times the national average” (8).

bellowing and arguing. Birdie also often witnesses sexual events that should not be seen by young girls. For example, in one instance before her father abandons her and her mother, Birdie walks in on a woman named Terry “rubbing up against her dad in the kitchen. She noticed that her dad’s breathing was funny. From this, she took it that her dad did not seem to mind it so much” (Lindberg 34). Similarly, her uncles are violent and antagonistic. Not only do they lash out in sexually predatory ways (as can be seen by Birdie’s rape by Larry), but they are also verbally abusive. In particular, Larry becomes an unsettling fixture at the kitchen table: “Larry, whiskey on his breath, snarled from the kitchen—where he would be sitting alone, as always, with a bottle in front of him” (Lindberg 164). Birdie’s presence in the kitchen around the uncles opens her up to violence and unwarranted comments about her body. Consequently, what are traditionally seen as safe spaces (like the kitchen) exist as spaces of chaos and uncertainty for Birdie.

Because of her hostile home life, from a very young age, Birdie receives conflicting messages about beauty and her body. While her mother, Maggie, and her aunt, Valene, never exhibit judgment towards Birdie and her physical body, the men in her family and the general outside world teach her that her fatness is shameful and undesirable, and that she should make herself small in order to avoid ridicule about her appearance. Uncle Louis’s comments prove to be particularly harsh. For example, during one of her family’s many drunken evenings, Birdie tries to pour herself a glass of Coke, but Louis stops her:

“Put that down, girl, you know after five o’clock it’s mix, not pop,” her uncle Louis had barked at her. She’d jumped a little and all of the adults, some of them louder than others, laughed as Bernice put the Coke bottle down. If she drank a

glass of it, it would mean that someone might have to leave the house later in the evening to pick up another bottle. [...] She didn't want the Coke that badly though. Her uncle had snorted at her meanly, "Lose some weight." She had walked out of the room to her mother's voice. "Really, Lou, one glass isn't going to be missed," her mom said. "That kid's too sensitive," she heard her uncle mutter. (Lindberg 31)

Her uncle's comments (and his support by others in the room) teach Birdie that her consumption is shameful and that she does not deserve to partake in a joyful relationship with food. While the uncles and the skinny people in the room are permitted to consume the Coke freely, other's shaming of Birdie's fatness bars her from feeling that same enjoyment. Harkening back to Hannah Bacon's "Fat, Syn, and Disordered Eating: The Dangers and Powers of Excess," the pleasure associated with food codes certain food items as 'dangerous,' 'shameful,' and 'sinful.' Moreover, this coding deems certain consumers as 'acceptable' and others as 'overly-indulgent'; as a consequence, the men and the skinny women in Birdie's family are arbitrarily and falsely labelled as 'disciplined' and 'healthy,' whereas Birdie's fatness puts her outside of this circle. Select family members get to consume Coke (and alcohol) without shame; however, Birdie has to put up a fight to be able to drink a single glass of pop.

While her uncles teach her that her fatness is shameful, they, simultaneously, act sexually and inappropriately towards her and other fat Indigenous women and girls. This mixed messaging confuses Birdie, as she knows that men are sexually attracted to fat Native women: "Bernice and her Auntie Val are not the type they took pictures of—the type they remembered and wanted to remember. No one likes the fat Indian woman. Well, the men sure did, but no one wants to put them on postcards and imprints to send back

home. Maybe fat was not noble enough” (Lindberg 19). *Birdie* highlights colonial constructions of ‘desirability’ that circulate in Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities alike. In their article “Fat Women as ‘Easy Targets’: Achieving Masculinity Through Hogging,” Ariane Prohaska and Jeannine Gailey assert that the paradox of straight men hating fatness but loving to be with fat women highlights a larger issue of destructive, white masculinity. Straight men often feel ashamed of their attraction to fat women while, simultaneously, they use their sexual encounters with fat women to gain power and status—both over women, and within their male social groups. According to a study that Prohaska and Gailey conducted on college men from an unidentified Midwestern university, straight men “achieve masculinity by pursuing fat [...] women” (Prohaska and Gailey 164). Straight men will sexually pursue fat women—an act called “hogging”—both because they see fat women as easier targets than thin women, and also because they view sex with fat women as an ‘experience’ that would make a great story amongst male friends. As Prohaska and Gailey assert, “as long as standards of masculinity are rigid and unachievable for most men, negative sexual consequences will exist for all women” (Prohaska and Gailey 165). Along the same line, *Birdie* recognizes the ways in which the men in her community like to have sex with fat women, but in doing so, continue to hold power over these same women.

Moreover, *Birdie*’s uncles, her father, and the men that she engages with through sex work, behave as if the sexuality of Indigenous women is societally contingent on men’s desire. Men such as these believe they are free to the consumption of all things and people, while women have to work tirelessly to earn this right—often never succeeding.

In her bestselling 2019 memoir *A Mind Spread Out on the Ground*, Haudenosaunee author Alicia Elliott writes that men are societally permitted to dictate and control women's appearance. But when women attempt to take back said control and create their own form of 'beauty,' men label them as 'vain,' 'superficial,' and 'untrustworthy,':

Women can be the subject of millions of paintings hung in galleries, often painted by men. Women can be in varying states of undress in photos used for advertisements, often photographed by men. Women can appear in films, TV shows, fashion spreads, porn—often shot, directed and edited by men. Women's bodies can be posed and prodded and digitally manipulated until they look nothing like the real women who stood in front of the camera. That's all fine. But if a woman puts on makeup, takes a picture of herself, for herself, adds a picture or two and posts it on Instagram, men comment that this is why you can't trust women. (Elliott 179)

Similarly, the Meetoos women are only 'beautiful' and 'sexy' when men label them as such. Men (even Indigenous men who wield less power than Whites within racial hierarchies) feel entitled to decide who is 'unsexy.' This contradictory and unfair judgment towards Indigenous women, while confusing to Birdie, is normalized in her home.

Sexist and sexualized narratives about Indigenous women date back to the colonization of Turtle Island, or what is now known as Canada and the United States of America. Alongside the racist presumptions that 'permit' white settler-colonizers to steal Indigenous land comes the egregiously sexist equation of Indigenous women with the domination of geographic space. With colonization came the white male assumption that the bodies of Indigenous women are objects that can also be claimed. In his book *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization*, Robert Pogue Harrison suggests that this colonial desire is a kind of psychological hunger: "The insatiable mouth of empire devour[s] the

land [...] It is hard to imagine that a civilization [...] could remain so blind in their practices as to bring about the ruin of the ground on which their survivals were based” (Harrison 55). Concomitantly, this perception of the land as consumable falsely assumes that its people are too. In her book *Indian Country: Essays on Contemporary Native Culture*, Gail Guthrie Valaskakis explores the hyper-sexualized, unrealistic, and often violent images of Indigenous women and the land that have circulated since colonization. These images, such as that of Sacajawea and Pocahontas, are unrealistic and romanticize the Indigenous experience: “Our image of the Bird Woman is ageless: a shapely Indian princess with perfect Caucasian features, dressed in a tight-fitting red tunic, spearing fish with a bow and arrow from a birchbark canoe gliding across a mountain-rimmed, moonlit lake” (Valaskakis 125). Not only do these picturesque visuals negate the violences inflicted upon Indigenous people and their lands through colonization, but they suggest that any Indigenous women who do not fit within this sexualized mold are unattractive or undesirable. These images, as Valaskakis argues, perpetuate the longstanding misconceptions surrounding Indigenous womanhood and beauty, and are extremely damaging to girls and women such as Lindberg’s Birdie.

Furthermore, the surge in violence against Indigenous women and girls is deeply connected to Canada as a colonial nation.²⁴ Notably, in her article “Systemic Oppression,

²⁴ Many scholars and activists conclude that violence against Indigenous women must be examined in the context of colonization (see D. A. Brownridge 2003, S. Maracle 1993, and Ontario Native Women’s Association & Ontario Federation of Indian Friendship Centres 2007). However, as Douglas A. Brownridge notes, “colonization theory is not able to identify why some Aboriginal women experience violence by their partner and others do not” (67).

Violence, and Healing in Aboriginal Families and Communities,” Mi’kmaq and Celtic writer Cyndy Baskin asserts that Indigenous peoples in Canada specifically link the uprising of gendered violence in Indigenous communities to western values and practices: “We know this because it has been passed down from generation to generation via oral teachings by our Elders. Family violence did not exist because of the values connected to women and children and because of the strong collective set-up of communities” (Baskin 153). Upon colonization, the western devaluation and submission of women became common practice amongst Indigenous peoples as well, and many Indigenous men came to adopt this patriarchal mindset. As Baskin argues, assimilation of Indigenous peoples altered their traditionally egalitarian gender relations: “Specific practices of assimilation were the outlawing of traditional Aboriginal ceremonies, the enforced training of men to become farmers and women to become domestics, and a systematic indoctrination of Christian theory and practice through the residential school system” (155). While most Indigenous peoples once held a strong respect for Indigenous women and matrilineal relations, the colonial imposition of patriarchy manifested in violence against Indigenous women: “In the original teachings the Creator gave to Aboriginal peoples at the time of creation, women were valued as sacred because of their ability to give life and thereby bring new spirits onto the Earth” (153). As a way to undermine Indigenous family structures, in which women were highly revered, colonizers objectified Indigenous women in order to exploit them and control them.

Moreover, because Indigenous men were stripped of any power and control they once held in their communities before colonization, adopting western patriarchal systems

became a necessity for Indigenous men to maintain control in a new system that left them powerless.²⁵ In *I Am Woman: A Native Perspective on Sociology and Feminism*, Sto:lo author Lee Maracle argues that, “the denial of Native womanhood is the reduction of the whole people to a sub-human level. [...] The dictates of patriarchy demand that beneath the Native male comes the Native female. The dictates of racism are that Native men are beneath white women and that Native females are not fit to be referred to as women” (17-8). Lindberg explores this patriarchal phenomenon directly in *Birdie*. With the imposition of western cultural practices, the women in Birdie’s family cannot separate themselves from the abusive uncles; Maggie, Valene, Freda, and Birdie all depend on the men financially, and, therefore, nutritionally. When Birdie goes to live with Aunt Valene, they turn to Uncle Larry for the funds to purchase a school uniform. Moreover, upon noting that Birdie has more access to food than she did when she was young, Valene highlights her dependence on Uncle Larry as a child: “We used to take bannock and lard to school and that’s all we had. Your uncle Larry,’ she would always lower her voice at this point, ‘used to skip his meal and give it to the younger ones’” (Lindberg 73-4). Furthermore, the uncles are responsible for hunting and the preparation of meat for feeding the family. While Birdie understands the nutritional need for this role, she sees an

²⁵ In *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity*, bell hooks asserts that Black men also commonly adopted this patriarchal mindset: “Transplanted African men [...] had to be taught to equate their higher status as men with the right to dominate women, they had to be taught patriarchal masculinity. They had to be taught that it was acceptable to use violence to establish patriarchal power. The gender politics of slavery and white-supremacist domination of free black men was the school where black men from different African tribes, with different languages and value systems, learned in the “new world,” patriarchal masculinity” (2).

unsettling equation between how the uncles treat game in relation to women's bodies. For example, when she sees her uncles preparing a newly-slaughtered moose, Birdie feels nauseous:

The men, as if receiving a signal, moved towards the moose. The garage tilted and blurred towards her as she saw the flashing of a knife in her uncle's hand. [...] The blood clouds Bernice's eyes and she retched, missing herself and hitting the lilac shrub. She sat down and watched the brown Cokey liquid freeze to the sparse bare branches of the tree like tiny ornaments on a Christmas tree. (Lindberg 45)

When she watches her uncles, Birdie instinctually feels as if she is witnessing something forbidden and dangerous, yet also enticing. The moose blood is both familiar, but also frightening: "It looked like a pink Slushie, the blood in the truck box crystalline and frozen" (Lindberg 44). To Birdie, watching the men handle the meat invokes memories of sexual violence and Uncle Larry's inappropriate sexual comments: "Her uncle Larry had forgone any notion of intimacy and called it 'boning.' She didn't like that word, either. It reminded her of de-boning and chickens. The image of fat and flesh grinding together and apart made her feel queasy" (Lindberg 35). As the behaviour of Birdie's uncles suggests, colonization has entirely upended the wellness of Indigenous communities, and led to some Indigenous men perpetuating the dehumanization of Indigenous women by viewing their bodies as commodities ripe for exploitation.

While Birdie's uncles cause Birdie to turn away from food and the traditional means of meal preparation, Birdie views food positively in relation to the various women in her life and extended family. As the women in Birdie's family suggest, food and the sharing of meals are ways to express care, kindness, and gratitude. Though Birdie feels a

sense of horror when she watches her uncles slice moose meat, she fondly recalls preparing deer meat with her *Kohkom*. Unlike the exclusive ‘club’ that her uncles seem to occupy, Birdie gets to participate in the deer preparation with the women-identifying members of her Indigenous community; the routine of cleaning and preparing meat is something that she and her grandmother share:

They would scrape scrape scrape the remaining tissue, meat and fat from the hide, *Kohkom* with a deer bone, Bernice with a fashioned bed leg. The smell of the fat on her hands was strong and almost putrid. Nowadays, they had to keep the hides in a freezer and then thaw them out. Kind of like killing them twice, *Kohkom* told her. The smell was from freezing, thawing and freezing, not like the old days, *Kohkom* said in Cree. Bernice wondered silently if in the old days *Kohkom* used a wringer washer to soak the hides in like she did now. (Lindberg 73)

Kohkom teaches Birdie to appreciate food rather than to fear it or to be ashamed of it. Moreover, through these moments, Birdie writes herself into the narrative of feminine food preparation and sustainability. Yet, when she is older and living with Aunt Val, while walking through Edmonton one evening, Birdie comes across unused deer legs in the street. Finding them in the city feels alien and unsettling: “Deer legs. Finding them in the city surprised her. Finding them unused and discarded surprised her even more. At home the legs would be used for sausage. In the big city, they were little. Although it was cold, she thought she could smell the hide smell” (Lindberg 73). Not only are the deer legs out of place, but they hold an entirely different meaning for Birdie than for those who are not familiar with traditional ways to prepare them. Birdie thinks that the disposal of the deer legs is wasteful: “When she walked by that family’s house, the family who had the legs, she wondered what they did with the rest of the deer. She wondered if they ate any of it,

or if they tanned the hide. Most likely, they send the hide to a taxidermist and didn't eat the meat. Bernice and her aunt could have used the meat" (Lindberg 73). For Birdie, the deer legs, while a reminder of her family's constant financial need in a racist system, are also a symbol of the resourcefulness of the women in her family.

Similarly, despite her strained and often unhealthy relationship with her late mother, Birdie reveres Maggie and never feels shamed by her mother for her appearance or relationship to food. While Birdie's sense of home is strained by the presence of alcohol and violence, she feels most connected to a "homey" feeling through her mother and food. With food, Birdie connects to her mother and loves her despite her parenting faults. While undergoing her spiritual journey and fast, Birdie imagines herself as a pot of her mom's simmering moose stew that just needs time to be fully prepared and ready:

She tries to think of herself as a moose stew. She will know when she is done. Her mom made the best moose stew; maybe it was because the meat was always fresh, maybe it was because her bannock was served with it, but that stew was like a tonic that could cure most things. Maybe, she thinks, moose is home. The last time she had fresh moose was in the fall, before she moved into the city to go to school. (Lindberg 39)

By undertaking this journey, Birdie herself 'stews'; she relives, processes, and moves through the trauma that has led her to Lola's bake shop. She also acknowledges the ways in which the colonial state of Canada has robbed her of her culture and her connection to the women in her family: "She is so hungry. Not for food, not for drink, not for foreign skin. The appetite that sits next to her now is relatively unknown and persistent. She is hungry for family. For the women she loves. For the sounds of her language.[...] She misses her aunties, her cousins and her mom" (Lindberg 102). The journey that Birdie

takes during her week spent in bed allows her to come to terms with what and who she has lost, and, consequently, provides her with the strength to reclaim her body and soul from the forces and people who have inflicted damage upon it.

As she recalls the various women her life, Birdie comes to understand her body and herself as beautiful in relation to her women-identifying family members. Birdie uses these woman-to-woman bonding moments to separate herself from the comments and judgments made about her and her body throughout her childhood and womanhood by her uncles, classmates, complete strangers, and even medical professionals. During her childhood, Birdie believes she is not allowed to take up space, and she tries to make herself small in order to avoid the retorts and fatphobic abuse from those around her: “It seemed that no matter where she was, where she went, she was in the way. Even curled in her little cot, taking as little space as possible (reading, not looking up, not listening for anything but someone approaching her), she seemed to be the epicentre of some unkindness” (Lindberg 140). These comments bombard her daily. Whether it be sexual abuse or nasty comments from her uncles at home, or being called a “fat bitch,” “fat cow,” or “Buffalo” (Lindberg 140) by the other children in the care of Social Services, or being described as “Bernice the Buffalo” (Lindberg 143) by children at school, Birdie cannot escape these negative comments about her appearance; they continue into Birdie’s adulthood. While in the San—the psychiatric institution in which she stays before she moves to Gibsons—Birdie’s beauty and humanity are systematically dismissed, and her physical size and race are seen as her defining clinical problems: “*Patient is Native woman. Obese*” (Lindberg 121). Similarly, as she performs sex work in her young adult

years in order to survive financially, Birdie often has to meet with men who are violent and treat her as sub-human because of her race and size, to the point that Birdie does not realize it is happening anymore: “When she saw herself in the stainless steel oven reflection she realized he had blood on her lip. And, strangely enough, in her eye. She didn’t remember getting hit in the eye” (Lindberg 53). As she undergoes her spiritual journey, Birdie permits herself to heal from this lifetime of fatphobia and misogyny.

During this healing, Birdie reclaims her connection to the women in her life, and realizes that her own beauty is valid and stems from these relations. This is a revelation for Birdie because, during her youth, Birdie’s lack of physical resemblance to her mother, and her physical resemblance to her big aunt, Valene, was a source of anxiety: “For a while after that she avoided her mother’s eyes. Sometimes it was hard to look at her mom, her mom in the size four dress, and remember that they were related. And that she could not follow her” (Lindberg 88). Moreover, Birdie’s cousin, Skinny Freda, looks more like Maggie than Birdie does. As a child, Birdie views this skinniness as a source of happiness, but during her journey, she comes to realize that skinniness cannot be equated with happiness and health:

Her sistercousin seemed an inverted version of herself. Bernice had always thought that Freda’s confidence flowed out from under shadowed crevasses and angled bones. That some mélange of svelte certitude, magazine model skinnyhappiness leached out of her in places where silence and stuffing found Bernice wanting. It would be years before she understood that the funhouse mirror of their shared childhood would alter the ways they saw themselves and warp what others saw in them. (Lindberg 23)

In their article “Embodiment and the Meaning of the ‘Healthy Body’: An Exploration of First Nations Women’s Perspectives of Healthy Body Weight and Body Image,” Jennifer

Poudrier and Janice Kennedy articulate that Indigenous women's connections to health and body image have less to do with physical appearance, and focus instead on emotional and spiritual wellness. Lindberg uses Birdie's spiritual journey to demonstrate the inextricable link between mental and physical wellness, for Birdie cannot be physically well until is emotionally well. In turn, Birdie comes to represent a new model of health that the women in her life can follow.

Poudrier and Kennedy argue that the "healthy" Indigenous body should not be defined by particular physical size. Instead, as the women in their focus group emphasize, "food preparation and storage, healthy eating and health programs were all related to achieving a 'healthy body'" (21). Consequently, Indigenous women are more likely to measure 'health' by food access and nourishment, rather than through the attainment of a specific physical and aesthetic (namely, western) goal. Access to what urban white Canadians deem to be 'healthy' foods is not only a systemic issue in Indigenous communities, but said foods may not necessarily be the traditional 'healthy' foods of the Indigenous communities themselves. Poudrier and Kennedy's participants suggest that for Indigenous women to be 'healthy,' they need access to both traditional and non-traditional foods, and also resources and services that promote Indigenous mental and emotional wellness: "Indeed, healthy food that was affordable and appetizing was seen as important to health and the 'healthy body.' Purchasing, preparing and storing healthy food was very much connected to the broader context of women's lives" (Poudrier and Kennedy 21). Lindberg herself echoes this notion in the author interview at the end of her

novel; she suggests that wellness for Indigenous women is much more complex than access to food or physical size:

[Birdie] gets skinny and then she starts getting well. Skinny is not well in this book. Her Auntie Val is well. Maggie is not. Freda and Lola are somewhere in the middle. She comes into herself when she comes into her spirit, not when she comes into her body. She is sick in her skinniness, really, in the same way *Pimatisewin* is sick. She gets fed love as the tree gets fed love. She is better when fat with the love of women” (Lindberg 264)

To get better, Birdie does not need to consume foods deemed ‘healthy’ by white Canadians. Instead, as she consumes and embraces her own culture—as represented by traditional ingredients, women’s relationships, and a connection to the natural world—Birdie becomes healthy and finds herself as an Indigenous woman.

Birdie reclaims consumption that celebrates Indigenous-centred definitions of health in order to reclaim her own life—past, present, and future. Through her spiritual journey, and the life that she adopts alongside the women in Gibsons, Birdie separates her sense of self (and her own body) from the fatphobic abuses and insults that she endured as a child in Alberta, and realigns herself with consumption in a way that is productive to a newfound, positive identification with food. When she moves to Gibsons, Birdie finds work at a local bakery, and she bakes goods and nourishes customers in this community; in this space, Birdie reorients herself in the space of the kitchen, and she reclaims it as a space of creativity and healing. In the bakery, she can disconnect herself from the abuses she endured in her kitchen at home, and she, in turn, reconnects herself to her mother and grandmother’s cooking. Ironically, Birdie notes that the bakeshop owner herself, Lola, is not necessarily the best baker, and it is upon Birdie’s arrival that the pastries and breads

themselves improve and become more popular among customers. In fact, when Birdie undergoes her spiritual journey, she briefly worries about the state of the shop and the baked goods while she sleeps. However, she realizes that she needs to shift her focus away from nourishing customers in order to nourish and heal herself through her dreaming. Notably, she dreams of itemized lists of ingredients—an amalgamation of traditional Indigenous ingredients and western components—that she hungers for when she wakes up. These lists, which she manages to write down without anyone seeing her rise from her dream-state, become grocery lists for the healing ceremony for *Pimatisewin*—an old, sacred tree in B.C. that is dying from pollution: “Freda knew better than to say anything, but suspects the list was not her aunt’s. But Bernice’s. Which is ridiculous. But it has been a while since she believed in reason, anyhow” (Lindberg 196). When Birdie rises from her dream state, her first instinct is to write down a final list of ingredients that come from within “the roll of loose flesh on her belly” (Lindberg 240). For Birdie, the true path to healing and health, which she discovers through her journey, can be found through a reconnection to the spiritual and gustatory culture of the Cree people, and also to the natural world, as represented by the *Pimatisewin* tree. When she finally leaves her room and re-enters the kitchen, she utters “I need to cook” (Lindberg 244); in turn, her quest to cook for and nourish the tree turns into the ultimate step in beginning to heal her own self.

When she returns to her physical body, Birdie comes to the realization that she is beautiful precisely because she is the product and amalgamation of all the women who have touched her—some of whom she now shares a kitchen with. Her own agency and

these feminine connections determine her spiritual, emotional, and physical health and beauty, and not the men who have abused and hurt her. In her dedication to the healing of the tree, Birdie redefines consumption as ‘healthy,’ healing, and powerful—rather than shameful. By preparing the ceremony food in the kitchen of the bakeshop, Birdie, Val, Freeda, and even Lola, form a new familial unit that is founded on the nourishment of women. When relatives who have come from away for the ceremony attempt to help the four women in the kitchen, Birdie insists that this quality time be spent solely between her and her new “woman family” (Lindberg 245):

The four women headed to the kitchen, where they have been for hours. Every so often, Bernice walks slowly past the front room of the bakery, which is filled beyond full with relatives and strangers who have gathered for what they thought was a funeral. And a wake. Bernice has so little energy that she merely managed to greet everyone with a smile before she returned to the kitchen. Several female relatives jumped up to help. ‘No,’ Bernice had croaked. ‘Just them.’ She pointed with her lips to the bedraggled family she had formed in Gibsons. ‘Just us four.’ (Lindberg 244-5)

This “madefamily” (Lindberg 245), while comprised of an aunt, a cousin, and a mildly-racist white woman, is the unit that both holds Birdie, and also walks alongside her as she learns to love and reorient herself within a Canadian system that works against her and other Indigenous women.²⁶ Through the four women, Lindberg constructs a diverse family that works together and supports Birdie unconditionally in her healing process:

“[Birdie] had given the three women her ingredient list, those ingredients that came to her

²⁶ Because of colonialism, Indigenous women in Canada face alarmingly high rates of social, economic, and political discrimination. As Cyndy Baskin articulates, a feminist analysis of Indigenous and non-Indigenous relations in Canada points to the violence, abuse, and oppression that Indigenous women continue to face as a result of structural inequalities.

in her dreamstate, those that had come to them as gifts, and they had set about organizing the kitchen. Intent for hours, she can barely make out their feasttalk. The words are frothy and full. Unintelligible and edible” (Lindberg 245). The support and love within the woman family is unconditional, and, as Lindberg suggests, perhaps this mutual understanding and respect is the first big step that needs to be taken before any reconciliation or healing can truly begin.

Unsurprisingly, Birdie’s new, healthy, and spiritually-rich life derives from food and the bakeshop. By reclaiming food-centric spaces, such as the kitchen, Birdie redefines them as ‘warm’ and ‘welcoming’ environments rather than ‘abusive’ and ‘oppressive’; she chooses to exhibit agency through food, and, as a result, separates herself from the abuses of her past. As Lindberg demonstrates, Birdie’s woman family and their healing work in the kitchen are pivotal not only to Birdie’s well-being, but also to the wellness of Indigenous cultures and the natural world as a whole. Notably, when the four women arrive alongside the other ceremony-goers to give their food offering to the tree, Birdie notices that she and the tree are both hungry to be fed and nourished. While her “stomach rumbles pleasantly” (Lindberg 247), the *Pimatisewin* is “waiting to be fed, to have nations unite in one place” (Lindberg 247). Lindberg later reveals that this is the same tree that Birdie’s mother, Maggie, shared food with before her eventual murder on the Highway of Tears: “It was a relative, anyways, so [Maggie] thought it was only right. She started out cordially and ate lunch with the tree, offering it tobacco and then some of her coffee and muffin” (Lindberg 255). Through ceremony and the sharing of food, Birdie reconnects herself to her culture, her family, while, simultaneously,

forming a new sense of self and a new woman family: “The four women gingerly unpack the feast offering, and place it at the base of the tree, giving the earth thanks for all that they have, for the clarity to be able to see it and for having been given the gift to survive” (Lindberg 247). Birdie even welcomes Lola into this ceremony; this careful inclusion on Lindberg’s part suggests that, while there may not always be a clear understanding between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in Canada, there can still be mutual respect: “She doesn’t quite understand the offering, and the feast even less, but Lola sparkles with richness from being a part of it all” (Lindberg 250). Moreover, Lindberg hints that this relationship between Birdie, Lola, the bakeshop, and even Birdie’s extended family will be ongoing, as the four women leave the ceremony together to return home and share a meal with Birdie’s relatives. By representing this continued future in the kitchen, Lindberg holds a seat at the table for everyone who is willing to acknowledge, respect, and love all of their relations.

In her poem “Perhaps the World Ends Here,” Muscogee poet Joy Harjo writes that the world begins and ends at the kitchen table: “At this table we sing with joy, with sorrow. We pray of suffering and remorse. We give thanks. / Perhaps the world will end at the kitchen table, while we are laughing and crying, eating of the last sweet bite” (Harjo 1994). Tracey Lindberg’s *Birdie* ends in a similar fashion, with Indigenous and non-Indigenous characters coming together for a ceremonial feast that celebrates the healing of the landscape and Cree culture. Through the tale of Birdie Meetoos, and her journey to eventual self-rediscovery in a B.C. bakeshop, Lindberg shows how kitchen spaces can be both oppressive and productive; however, when Birdie claims her place in these food

environments, she highlights how important it is for all individuals to feel good and welcome at the kitchen table. In the sharing of food and stories, Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in Canada can come together and begin to form some semblance of a respectful relationship. Stories, like that of Birdie, build the bridge between differing peoples, and also help to begin the individual healing process. As Tracey Lindberg suggests through *Birdie*, sharing food is a first-step in forming cohesive bonds between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in Canada. If Canada cannot nostalgically ‘reconcile’ something that has never been, then, as Lindberg argues, we can use art to “change one heart at a time” (Alex 2015; quoting Lindberg). Similarly, the conversations and stories shared at dinner tables make positive food feelings and self-image possible. In *Birdie*, Tracey Lindberg normalizes and humanizes diverse body types by validating Cree conceptions of ‘beauty’ and ‘wellbeing.’ In doing so, she not only articulates that consumption, particularly that done by Indigenous women, should be celebrated, but she also opens the door for positive food feelings and relationships for her Indigenous and non-Indigenous readers alike.

CONCLUSION: “You can’t sit with us”²⁷

At a time when social media makes us feel more and more disconnected, food can be a vessel for connection, reformation, and growth. Whether it be a food court table, a bakery, a restaurant, or the kitchen in a family home, these food spaces can connect the once divided, and also form new relationships that thrive on positive food feelings. As Kathleen Stewart says in *Ordinary Affects*, “We become what we think about” (112). When we change our focus from self-blame to, instead, feel positively about the food we share and consume, we, in turn, can learn to feel positively about ourselves. Mona Awad, Saleema Nawaz, and Tracey Lindberg all undertake this paradigm shift in their novels. As these authors question, if diet cultures want us to eat for ‘health,’ ‘fitness,’ and longevity of existence, what are we supposed to fill that life with? Will we ever truly feel satiated and fulfilled if we are constantly monitoring what we eat and determining how these foods will make us look? Perhaps, as Awad, Nawaz, and Lindberg posit, the physical end ‘result’ of eating is not the point. Instead, the moments when we bake a cake, share a meal with loved ones, or enjoy a donut in a cafeteria, are valid, ‘healthy,’ and are the very things that we were put on this earth to do.

Awad, Nawaz, and Lindberg use positive and negative moments of consumption to highlight how food feelings shape people physically, mentally, spiritually, and emotionally. However, more specifically, each demonstrates the stakes of positive food feelings for oppressed and racialized communities. Through their protagonists, Awad, Nawaz, and Lindberg subvert white narratives of thin ‘happiness.’ Awad’s Lizzie,

²⁷ *Mean Girls*, 2004.

Nawaz's Beena and Sadhana, and Lindberg's Birdie, instead, each grapple with the limitations of the 'happy object' of thinness. Pro-dieting discourses of 'weight' and 'health' shape how these women-identifying characters feel about themselves and food. Mona Awad's Lizzie, as a fat woman of colour in Canada, spends her entire life feeling like she can never compare to the thin, white women that the men (of all backgrounds) in her life seem to desire. She, like so many other individuals, becomes obsessed with participating in the very system that oppresses her, and she comes to hate food, her body, and herself. However, though she does not extricate herself from diet cultures, Lizzie does reach a level of awareness about her participation in and victimization by narratives of thin, white desirability. At the end of Awad's book, readers see Lizzie contemplating the ridiculousness of dieting discourse, and she wonders if there will ever be a way out for people who come to this realization. Even when she does reach 'thinness,' Lizzie never finds 'happiness,' and Awad's readers are left questioning where joy can be found—if not through a skinny physique.

Conversely, Saleema Nawaz's *Bone and Bread* appears to be the answer that Awad's readers are looking for. Nawaz depicts the moments of positive food relationships and community that Awad's Lizzie lacks. In *Bone and Bread*, mixed-race sisters Beena and Sadhana experience a great deal of family trauma that alters their relationships with themselves, each other, and food. With their parents, Beena and Sadhana share special moments around the kitchen table, in the family bakery, and at the market; in these food environments, this family expresses love for one another, and gratitude for their very existence. When their parents die, Beena and Sadhana become disconnected from these

positive food feelings; they both struggle against societal expectations of women's bodies, and also the fact that they have brown skin in a structurally and individually racist context. Yet, after Sadhana's untimely death, Beena decides to reestablish her family's historically positive food feelings, and reclaim her body and sense of self from the throes of dieting cultures. By prioritizing moments of shared consumption and community with her son, Beena allows herself to reconnect with her late mother, father, and sister, while also, simultaneously, moving forward into a new life of food and family joy.

Similarly, in her novel *Birdie*, Tracey Lindberg's Cree protagonist, Birdie, uses food to reclaim her body and identity from the white, colonial state of Canada. However, unlike Nawaz's Beena and Sadhana, whose parents encourage positive food feelings, Birdie grows up in an environment where her fatness and consumption are shamed and ridiculed. As a result, Birdie cultivates her own feelings of food joy; she establishes new, positive relationships with her woman family that allow her to reclaim food environments and redefine her body on her own terms. As Lindberg highlights, the settler-Canadian idolization of the thin, white body perpetuates fatphobia, racism, and violence against Indigenous bodies. Instead, through Birdie's journey to self-discovery, Lindberg prioritizes Indigenous understandings of 'health' and 'wellness,' and reclaims the Indigenous woman's body from the exclusionary white-Canadian narrative. Birdie's journey to positive food feelings not only humanizes diverse body types in Canada, but it also demonstrates the importance of community and human relationships through food. In turn, Birdie feels happy not because of how her body looks, but because she gets to

share food with people that she loves and encourage an environment of healing and growth.

By discounting narratives of thin ‘happiness,’ Awad, Nawaz, and Lindberg all demonstrate the absurdity of religiously pursuing thinness. When diet cultures position thinness as an ultimate, divine state of happiness, they dismiss the narratives and bodies of anybody who does not meet these criteria. Conversely, these novelists give voice to these often overlooked perspectives in North American diet cultures. They ask their readers: Whose stories does Canada as a nation privilege? Whose food practices and bodies are ‘acceptable’ in a white Canadian context? Who do white Canadians welcome at their tables? These communal food settings are what Awad’s *Lizzie* longs for, what Nawaz’s *Beena* and *Sadhana* nostalgically remember, and what Lindberg’s *Birdie* autonomously creates. Through their food-related themes, these three authors demonstrate the importance of positive food feelings and body-image for the wellbeing of their women-identifying characters.

Certainly, this work extends far beyond the fiction of three women authors who prioritize the narratives of women-identifying individuals. Outside of the limits of a Master’s thesis, this research might broaden to include the food narratives of men-identifying and non-binary individuals—as there are, undoubtedly, societal expectations of what people of any gender ‘should’ look like in a white Canadian context. Not only would this expansion allow me to move beyond limiting my research to cis-women’s experiences, but, also, this would discredit the (often misogynistic) narrative that the kitchen exists only as the woman’s domain. Furthermore, I would like to incorporate

more research on the direct influence of American media and cultures on Canadian food and body-image narratives, as I only broached this topic peripherally in this thesis. While, from a white Canadian perspective, American and Canadian media sources seem to function in conjunction with each other, someone from American standpoint would likely see Canadian food and health practices very differently from their own. Overall, an expansion of this project would require me to search outside of my limited perspective as a white Canadian woman.

In short, what began as a venture to love my own body flourished into a research project of, what I consider to be, much more importance. Instead, not only have I come to appreciate my body as ‘good enough’ in its individuality, but I now see the cruciality of understanding its privileged position in relation to other bodies in Canada, and also in the structures I interact with. Therefore, learning to accept my body for what it is raises much more pressing questions: How do the feelings I have about my own body shape how I feel about other bodies in Canada? How do the statements that I make about myself perpetuate narratives about people who are different from me? What is my body ‘allowed’ to do that other bodies in Canada are not? Most of all, while I now feel comfortable and ‘free’ enough to eat Tim Hortons donuts at a food court table with my boyfriend, would Lizzie, Beena, Sadhana, or Birdie feel the same?

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CURRICULUM VITAE

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