

*You Are What You Eat: Women, Eating  
and Identity in Kate Grenville's  
"Lilian's Story" and Barbara  
Hanrahan's "The Scent of Eucalyptus"*

VERONICA THOMPSON

It was a wild night in the year of Federation that the birth took place. Horses kicked down their stables. Pigs flew, figs grew thorns. The infant mewled and stared and the doctor assured the mother that a caul was a lucky sign. *A girl?* the father exclaimed, outside in the waiting room, tiled as if for horrible emergencies. This was a contingency he was not prepared for, but he rallied within a day and announced: *Lilian. She will be called Lilian Una.*

Later, the mother lay on her white bed at home, her palms turned up, staring at the moulding of the ceiling with the expression of surprise she wore for the next twenty years. *You didn't tell me it would hurt*, she whispered to her friends as they patted the crocheted bedjacket, and she was already beginning to suffer her long overlapping series of indispositions. The friends picked up the baby from its crib beside the bed and placed it in the mother's arms. *A lovely picture*, they agreed, and left.

Sunlight slanted between the curtains so that a band lay across the bed like something alive. The carpet flamed where the sun fell over it, and on the ceiling the reflection of the waves of the bay outside flickered on and on like a conversation. Eucalypt leaves rubbed against each other and a kookaburra pealed in hysteria somewhere. The baby slipped further down off the breast, but the mother lay smiling and staring at the ceiling, listening to the bird, until the baby fell to the floor. When Alma came in, reddened from dusting the banister, she saw Lilian's tiny fingernails scraping weakly over the patterns of the carpet, and her wet mouth opening and closing on air.

KATE GRENVILLE, *Lilian's Story*

I HAVE QUOTED the opening paragraphs of Kate Grenville's *Lilian's Story* at length because they introduce the relationships I wish to explore in this paper: the mother/daughter relationship which recurs in contemporary Australian literature by women, a relationship often represented as fraught with tension; and the

colonial relationship between Australia and the "Mother Country" (Britain). Grenville's juxtaposition of Lilian's birth and of Australia's "birth" at Federation is particularly significant in terms of the parent-child metaphors which pervade imperial discourse. This article establishes links between daughters and colonies, and between mothers and imperial centres; by exploring motifs of women eating, it exemplifies the problematic position of the settler-invader woman.

Dorothy Jones, in her article "The Post-Colonial Belly Laugh: Appetite and its Suppression," suggests connections between post-colonial concerns and long-recognized theories that women's relationships to food and eating are problematic. According to Jones, "food is . . . highly significant in regard to empire and colonisation" because empires "swallow not only raw materials, but entire countries and nations" (1-2). Jones argues that colonization perceived "as an act of devouring, has interesting implications for women whose situation under patriarchy has frequently been compared to that of colonized peoples" (6). For Jones, food represents an important site for the female settler-invader subject's "negotiation of national and class identity" (4) because colonial conditions precluded the luxury of servants to prepare food, as well as the dietary restraint that signified nineteenth-century "ladyhood." A survey of contemporary Australian and Canadian women's writing leads Jones to claim that food, appetite, and female body size are important subject matter for women writers working within a post-colonial framework where "images of large bodied women and devouring women" are interpreted as protests against patriarchy and can be read as "powerfully transgressive . . . as a rejection of the confining limits imposed on female behaviour and desire in a male-dominated culture" (20). Jones concludes that these images "may also be apt expressions of colonial or post-colonial opposition to imperialism" (20). I will extend Jones's argument by proposing that the metaphor of the fat/eating woman takes on another significance in the historical, geographical, and theoretical space of the settler-invader colony.

As Alan Lawson has argued in detail, the filial relationship between the settler colony and the Old World, which causes the

settler culture to be simultaneously colonizing and colonized, is an ambivalent one. The settler-invader subject is suspended between two cultures, and two countries—the Mother Country and the Other Country. The settler-invader represents a colonial authority which becomes progressively less authentic the longer the settler is absent from the culture s/he represents; simultaneously and coincidentally, the settler-invader desires indigenous authenticity even while s/he exercises authority over the native. The settler-invader is thus caught between the desire to identify with and against the Mother Country, making the negotiation of identity an ongoing concern. When the settler-invader subject is female this crisis of identity is complicated further by the difficulties experienced in female self-identification within the existing patriarchal society. Eating disorders in Australian post-colonial women's writing seem to me to reflect the complexities and equivocacies of these negotiations.

In *The Hungry Self*, Kim Chernin argues that there is a definite association between eating, and struggling for identity. Chernin also contends that the struggle of the female for identity is firmly positioned in the realm of the mother/daughter relationship: the daughter is unable to seek fulfilment, despite the opportunities available to her, due to her own awareness of the mother's dissatisfaction in the traditional roles of wife and mother. The guilt and anguish this ambivalence inspires entraps the daughter and lies at the heart of eating disorders.

I draw some obvious parallels between Lawson's and Chernin's arguments. The female settler-invader subject caught between the desire to identify with and against the Mother Country is reminiscent of the bulimic/anorexic daughter's debilitating guilt for refusing to repeat her mother's choices—domesticity and maternal sacrifice—while simultaneously refusing to surpass her mother.

If one accepts Chernin's arguments, and also my contention that in the post-colonial writings of Australian women, female characters often experience discomfort with Australia and/or England, then representations of daughters and eating disorders signify more than troubled mother/daughter relationships. They also signify the difficult position of the female settler-

invader subject in the Mother Country/daughter colony relationship. The oppositions in the mother/daughter relationship which manifest themselves as an eating disorder can be read as a metaphor for the oppositions and ambivalences contained in the metaphorical mother/daughter relationship fostered by imperial discourse.

In *Lilian's Story*, Grenville's explores the problems of establishing female identity within a patriarchal and an imperial framework. Lilian Singer's inauspicious beginning initiates a life story which parallels two events—the literal colonizing of Australia and the metaphorical colonizing of a woman. Grenville admits that she was conscious of this parallel while writing *Lilian's Story*: she had just read Anne Summers's *Damned Whores and God's Police*, which “got me thinking about the colonial relationship as a metaphor for many kinds of relationships, of which, of course, the parent-child one is the most obvious. The father in *Lilian's Story* is called Albion, naturally, because he is in that oppressive imperial/colonial relationship with his daughter” (Turcotte, “Telling” 293).

Most post-colonial readings of Grenville's novel focus on Lilian's relationship with her father, and there is every indication that Lilian's obsession with food and her fatness is a reaction to the oppressive manner in which Albion rules the Singer household and its women. Her fatness becomes a protective barrier against her father's facts and his beatings, and she triumphs, to some degree, in her size: “Now I was fat. *I am a fat girl*. . . . I had grown big and could knock people down if I took a run at them, and block doorways, and there was too much flesh now for Father” (19). Tragically, despite Lilian's immense flesh and her ability to block doorways, Albion literally penetrates Lilian's protective “coat of flesh” by raping her.

The difficulties of the father/daughter relationship are of course key to an understanding of Lilian's obesity. Nonetheless, I believe we can add to our understanding by redirecting our focus to Lilian's relationship with her mother—the parental relationship that, after all, opens the novel, and one which I believe is important not only to *Lilian's Story* but to many other instances of settler-invader writing by women.

As Lilian narrates her life story, she also inserts into the text fragments of her mother's story, which has had a profound effect on Lilian. The account of Lilian's birth is immediately followed by a narrative fragment titled "Mother's Story." The importance of Lilian's mother to her becomes apparent again when Lilian is institutionalized and passes her time making up her "own versions of Mother . . . remembering the gold on the edge of Mother's little notebook and the way her hair blew in wisps around her face" (155). Lilian is already crying and remembering her mother when she is informed of the mother's death, and realizes she will never rectify the estrangement which characterized their relationship.

It is the pain of giving birth that causes Lilian's mother to withdraw from her initially, leaving Lilian, who already seeks the nourishment her mother cannot provide, to gulp air on the bedroom floor. Lilian's mother becomes increasingly distant as the years pass: to the natural curiosity of her child, she responds, "*I will explain later, Lilian, but now I will rest, and [lies] back on her couch*" (10). Lilian's excessive hunger corresponds to her craving for maternal attention; her ever-increasing figure then becomes a strategy to force the mother to "look" at Lillian from "her prostration on the couch" (10). But as Lilian expands, and it becomes increasingly apparent that she will never become the fragile lady her mother is, their estrangement intensifies. When Albion has Lilian committed to an institution, her mother abandons Lilian completely.

Lilian's uncontrollable hunger is undoubtedly, then, a reaction both to her father's violent punishments, and to her mother's detachment. But her hunger serves also as a means of negotiating the models of identity offered her. Lilian's mother is "a woman of pale colours: lilacs and lavenders and the grey of galahs" (5). This fragile and vague woman tells Lilian, "*You will be a lady one day, but now you are a little girl*" (5), and prepares her for ladyhood with instruction in modesty, tea-drinking and the art of conversation. While Lilian is waiting to be a lady she attempts to learn Shakespeare by heart and stomps through the house "*being Father*" (5).

Lilian's negotiation of identity suspends her between two cultures: the submissive ladyhood her mother represents, and the

intellectual realm her father inhabits. Lilian is unsuccessful both as a lady and as an intellectual. The greater tragedy, however, is that both models of identity, and the colonial relationships they imply, are withdrawn from her. Albion—who represents England and thus, figuratively, the Mother Country—is lost to her by the historical fact of Federation, which parallels Lilian's birth, thus making Lilian a symbol of Australia. As we have seen, Lilian's mother rejects her literally as a result of her birth; but all of Lilian's difficulties with her mother can be seen as symbolic of the metaphoric mother/daughter relationship which existed (and continues to exist) between England and Australia.

Lilian is offered two apparently conflicting models of identity, neither of which she finds satisfactory. To combat this she withdraws from both into a world of fat and, eventually, into madness. Despite the pain she experiences, however, Lilian's eating is also a transgressive act which enables her to forge an identity separate from and yet reflecting both her mother (and her mother's femininity) and the "Mother Country" (represented by her father). This is evident as she parades through Sydney in her blue chiffon frock reciting Shakespeare, "*ready for whatever comes next*" (227). The conclusion of *Lilian's Story* thus speaks the dilemma, theorised by Lawson, of the post-colonial settler subject whose ambivalences are ultimately empowering. As "Lilian grows into the massive body she herself has created [she grows into] a symbol, not so much of the nation, as of national potential" (Jones 19).

Barbara Hanrahan's *The Scent of Eucalyptus* also establishes links between the young female protagonist's difficult relationship with her mother and her difficult relationship with the "Mother Country." In this autobiographical novel the conflict is played out within the female domain of Rose Street, where the narrator lives with her mother, her grandmother and her aunt.

Like *Lilian's Story*, Hanrahan's narrative opens with the birth of the narrator:

My Mother hedged about my birth: said she found me in a rose. And I believed her—saw myself pink and perfect as a rubber dolly, added some modest gauze, even a little crown. . . .

My mother lied—that rose birth wasn't true. I was born the same as any other. Stripped of any past pretensions to wisdom, I entered the

world; lay naked before strangers who meant nothing to me, but to whom I, by my very helplessness, meant a lot. (7)

This lie introduces an antagonism between mother and daughter which pervades the text, as the equivocal feelings of the child towards her mother are expressed in the simultaneously distant and intimate relationship they share over the years.

The narrator of *The Scent of Eucalyptus* is fearful of the sacrifices and compromises she has seen her mother and grandmother making; she resents the mother's assumption that her life, also, will focus on marriage, children, and a suburban home. When the mother dissuades her from attending Teacher's college, the narrator enters Technical School:

I was part of a school that was a factory, pumping forth each year, from the swollen Commercial class, the girls of fifteen who would go to work as typists and clerks. At eighteen they would be engaged, at twenty—married, at thirty—old. (179)

Tension results also from the feeling that the mother is absent in a crucial sense. Of her mother, the narrator says: "My mother was elusive. I did not possess her" (13). Each morning the mother goes to her job before the child wakes. When she returns in the evening, the child feels, "I met a stranger at the tram stop, and I couldn't kiss her cheek. She wasn't the same. Not my mother" (13). In her "princess" accessories—Hot Chestnut hair colour, high heeled shoes, fox-trimmed coat, and coral smile—she seems "someone else's mother" (14).

Although as a child Hanrahan's narrator feels that Rose Street "was my street. It belonged to me" (97), she has no such feeling of recognition for Australia: "I looked about me for the sunburned land. In vain" (91). Hanrahan's narrator "is struck by a contradiction between her experience of the Australian landscape and [the] patriotic celebration of it in . . . school" (Thomas, "Writing" 61). This contradiction stems from the disparity between the "Australia" she experiences—an inner city neighbourhood—and the Eurocentric, imperialist definitions of Australia which have circulated since British colonial expansion. Visiting relatives in the Adelaide hills, the narrator encounters a countryside "more English than England" (87), which leads her to ask: "But where were the hills of the history book,

stitched with the pathways of Burke and Sturt and Leichhardt?—the hills of the sun-burned earth . . . the azure skies and fiery mountains we sang about at school before the flag spangled with all the stars of the Southern Cross I was never sure of seeing?” (90). Although in school she performs the appropriate loyalties to King and country, the narrator is uneasy and unfamiliar with popular constructions of her native country. Her feeling of unfamiliarity signals the difficulty of negotiating contradictory images of Australia.

Hanrahan's text, then, questions both the images of femininity represented by the mother, and widely circulating images of Australia. It is significant that the narrator and her grandmother explore and discover a “British” Adelaide while squeezed into their best clothes; the implication is that they must adhere to false feminine appearances in order to negotiate the unreal Australia beyond Rose Street. The narrator's concerns are conjoined as she reflects on the paintings at the Art Gallery which depict “pink and silver ladies . . . shrinking from harsh antipodean suns under parasols and trellised vine leaves” (102). The correlation between femininity and Australianness summarized in the paintings is oppositional to the femininity and Australianess that Hanrahan's narrator experiences (and desires) as a young woman and an Australian.

Despite her awareness that she is different, she undertakes a successful masquerade and becomes “accustomed to a world that others said was real” (156). In regard to Australia the narrator remarks, “I paid homage without question to a sovereign and a flag and a sunburned land that were not mine” (156); in regard to her mother she says that “I emulated my mother” (157) and the feminine world the mother represents. The narrator's comment that “I was a stranger to this world” (157) seems to apply equally to both. *The Scent of Eucalyptus*, then, is more than just the story of an Australian girlhood; it is also a story of negotiating female settler-invader subjectivity.

In contrast to Lilian, the narrator of Hanrahan's text struggles with her identity by rejecting food:

I refused to eat; locked myself away. My grandmother knocked in vain. Food grew colder. I longed to eat, but could not. . . . When I did



it was almost worth it. I felt calm and washed clean, emptied of all triflings of emotion. I was given (my mother said, as she always did, that I would kill her with worry) kisses and bread and butter. (165).

Her masquerade in an unfamiliar Australia, on the path to a female role she would rather avoid, is unmasked through her self-induced eating disorder. When she finally can eat, her food is accompanied by maternal comfort, reinforcing associations between mothers and food.

In these two novels, then, the problematic identity of the female settler-invader subject in relation to both her mother and the imperial centre of the Mother Country is indicated by the difficulties each of the female protagonists experiences in regard to food and eating. As Maggie Kilgour explains, the phrase "You are what you eat" calls into question "basic concepts of personal identity" (10) because "eating is a means of asserting and controlling individual and also cultural identity" (8).

#### WORKS CITED

- Chermin, Kim. *The Hungry Self: Women, Eating and Identity*. New York: HarperCollins, 1985.
- Grenville, Kate. *Lilian's Story*. St. Leonards, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 1985.
- Hanrahan, Barbara. *The Scent of Eucalyptus*. St. Lucia: U of Queensland P, 1973.
- Jones, Dorothy. "The Post-Colonial Belly Laugh: Appetite and its Suppression." Australia/Canada: Post-Colonization and Women's Texts Conference, Feb. 1992, The University of Calgary, Calgary, Alberta.
- Kilgour, Maggie. *From Communion to Cannibalism: An Anatomy of Metaphors of Incorporation*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1990.
- Lawson, Alan. "Theorizing the 'Settler' Subject: A Problem in Post-Colonial Theory." Forthcoming.
- . "Un/Settling Colonies: The Ambivalent Place of Discursive Resistance." ASPACLALS Conference, Jul. 1991, Monash University.
- Thomas, Sue. "Writing the Self: Barbara Hanrahan's *The Scent of Eucalyptus*." *Kunapipi* 9.3 (1989): 53-66.
- Turcotte, Gerry. "The Story-teller's Revenge: Kate Grenville Interviewed." *Kunapipi* 16.1 (1994): 147-58.
- . "The Ultimate Oppression: Discourse Politics in Kate Grenville's Fiction." *WLWE* 29.1 (1989): 64-85.
- . "Telling Those Untold Stories: An Interview with Kate Grenville." *Southerly* 3 (1987): 284-99.