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Rituals of Hunger Laurie Halse Anderson's *Wintergirls*

ABSTRACT: The following article discusses rituals of control and purification characteristic of *anorexia* and *bulimia nervosa*, as shown in Laurie Halse Anderson's novel *Wintergirls*. One of the main assumptions of the paper is that eating disorders should be analyzed in the context of contemporary Western culture and the conventional models of femininity. As the Beauty Myth becomes the modern religion, rituals of hunger are interpreted as a present-day version of religious rites.

KEY WORDS: *anorexia nervosa*, *bulimia nervosa*, the Beauty Myth, rituals of control and purification

“Rituals call for bodily action.”

Frederick BIRD, 1980: 21

Anorexia and *bulimia nervosa* have been popular subjects of psychological, anthropological, medical, philosophical, cultural, and literary analyses for at least three decades now. They have recurrently been referred to as an epidemic and mainstream behavior or, conversely, examined as rare occurrences, and discussed in relation to a wide variety of factors including particular genetic predispositions, bad parenting and oppressive family environment, sexual abuse, mental illnesses, addictions, and dieting. “Anorexia” and “bulimia” have been both opposed and likened to each other. In consequence of this far-reaching diversification of “anorexia and bulimia studies,” any attempt to determine the disorders’ single cause appears to be reductive and incomplete. Nonetheless, for the reason that they are linked to so many disciplines of knowledge, it seems necessary for their researchers to put them in a specific context.

To that end, I feel compelled to clarify that in this article I see the two disorders as interrelated, and the borderlines between them as permeable and shifting. On many Internet websites they are, in fact, presented as a twosome:

a thin girl, Ana, is always accompanied by her less glamorous friend, Mia.¹ The idea is also reflected in Laurie Halse Anderson's *Wintergirls* which I analyze in the interpretive part of this article, in which two best friends, (primarily) anorexic Lia and (primarily) bulimic Cassie, both develop "anorexic" rituals of control and "bulimic" rituals of purification to compete with each other to be the thinnest. The merging of the two disorders is illustrative of paradoxes inscribed within Western culture in which "we are simultaneously exhorted to be thin and to consume, to be hedonistic and virtuous, to worship the body and punish the body; the difficulty, even impossibility, of achieving a homeostasis in this culture is reflected in anxiety, guilt, anger and obsession" (SCEATS, 2000: 66). Most importantly, therefore, I discuss anorexic and bulimic rituals as different symptoms of the same cultural "malady." My understanding of this "malady" stems from such seminal feminist works as Naomi Wolf's *The Beauty Myth* (1991), Susan Bordo's *Unbearable Weight. Feminism, Western Culture and the Body* (1993), as well as Sandra Lee Bartky's *Sympathy and Solidarity and Other Essays* (2002). I adopt some of these authors' basic assumptions,² view eating disorders as cultural phenomena, and interpret them in the context of — often contradictory — cultural norms, laws, and values.

Admittedly, rituals are cultural phenomena, too, and "may be defined as culturally transmitted symbolic codes which are stylized, regularly repeated, dramatically structured, authoritatively designated and intrinsically valued" (BIRD, 1980: 19). The cultural sphere which has been most directly linked to ritualistic behaviors is that of religion. Religious rituals specifically "may be distinguished from other rituals primarily by one feature: they are considered to be a means by which persons establish and maintain their relation to what they consider to be sacred" (p. 22). For the sake of this paper, I adopt the general definition of a ritual provided above, which might be applicable in psychiatry, psychology, sociology, anthropology, and other fields of knowledge. At the same time, however, following Naomi Wolf and Michele Mary Lelwica, I begin my essay by pointing to correspondences between anorexia/bulimia and religion. In this light, the rituals I discuss later on the basis of Anderson's novel can be interpreted as religious.

¹ See, for example Janelle Lee's short essay "Ana and Mia, My Two Good Friends" (Available: <http://thoughtcatalog.com/janelle-lee/2012/07/ana-and-mia-my-two-good-friends/>. Accessed: 15.2.2014), or blogs "Ana and Mia" (Available: <http://anaandmia.wordpress.com/>. Accessed: 15.2.2014) and "Me, Ana, and Mia" (Available: <http://meanaandabc.tumblr.com/>. Accessed: 15.2.2014).

² That ours is a "dualistic heritage" (BORDO, 1993: 144) of Plato, Augustine, and Descartes; that in this tradition the body is the not-me, a cage/prison, an enemy, and "the locus of all that threatens our attempts at control" (pp. 144—145); that the body, therefore, is bound to be disciplined and manipulated; and that within Western culture it is women who are associated with the body and hence it is women rather than men whose bodies are watched, evaluated, shamed, modified, and sometimes starved.

In Naomi Wolf's famous study, the Beauty Myth is the dominant "ideology of femininity" (WOLF, 2002: 7) which determines the position of women in Western societies. It teaches both men and women that beauty — defined as objective and universal — is critical for a woman as it regulates her reproductive success ("women's beauty must correlate to their fertility, and since this system is based on sexual selection, it is inevitable and changeless" (p. 12)). Consequently, it suggests that it is *natural* for a woman to do whatever it takes to become beautiful, like it is *natural* for a man to "battle for beautiful women" (p. 12); it is, really, a matter of the survival of the human species. As Wolf shows, it is an easy task to undermine the "truths" of the Beauty Myth (pp. 12—14), and yet — somewhat paradoxically — it is an extremely strenuous task — and her ambition — to denaturalize or un-teach them.

Both Wolf's work and Michele Mary Lelwica's *Starving for Salvation: The Spiritual Dimensions of Eating Problems among American Girls and Women* shed some light on the predominance of the Beauty Myth. Lelwica explains the omnipotence of "consumer-media culture's prevailing ideas of womanhood" by referring to "the declining and contested authority of traditional religion":

For many girls and women, including those who believe and participate in organized religion, a media-saturated, consumer-oriented culture provides the primary images, beliefs, and practices through which the truths of their lives are sought and defined. In both public and private spheres, "secular" ideals and rituals coexist alongside Christian beliefs and disciplines, whose assumptions and forms they frequently resemble.

LELWICA, 1999: 5

In present day Western societies the Beauty Myth is, Wolf asserts, "the gospel of a new religion" (WOLF, 2002: 86). Women are members of the "Church of Beauty" (p. 86), which membership requires that they perform various rites — both in groups (e.g. attending fitness classes) and individually (in beauty parlors, as well as in the privacy of their own homes). The rites are numerous and it is imperative that they be performed rigidly and regularly: "woman's body is an ornamented surface ... and there is much discipline involved in this production" (BARTKY: 98).

The identification of the Beauty Myth with a modern religion, as explained by Wolf, does not necessarily justify making the connection between religion and eating disorders. The first assumption that has to be made, therefore, in order to elucidate the problem, is that although "beauty" and "thinness" are not synonymous, the former presupposes the latter: in present-day Western culture, beauty is thin. Regardless of individual tastes, in other words, the prevailing images of beauty are those of emaciated models, actresses and pop stars. Emily Fox-Kales actually refers to the present-day Western culture as "the culture of eating disorders ... a world in which food has become more taboo than sex ever

was and the bathroom scale more challenging a confrontation that the confessional booth” (FOX-KALES, 2011: 1). A thin/beautiful body represents the ultimate success a woman can achieve, one which guarantees happiness, self-confidence, popularity, money and romance:

When a woman is thin in this culture, she proves her worth, in a way that no great accomplishment, no stellar career, nothing at all can match. We believe she has done what centuries of a collective unconscious insist that no woman can do — control herself. A woman who can control herself is almost as good as a man. A thin woman can Have It All.

HORNBACHER, 1998: 81—82

It is then possible to speculate that not only do eating disorders “develop out of ... socially endorsed, normalizing disciplines” (LELWICA, 1999: 6), but that they also promise the followers of the “hunger cult” (WOLF, 2002: 198) salvation “through the mastery of their flesh” (LELWICA, 1999: 8); a return, as if, to the paradise lost through “the act of a woman eating” (p. 125).

The religious dimension of eating disorders, as well as their affinity to a particular kind of aesthetics, is perhaps most clearly traceable on pro-ana/pro-mia websites. These have proliferated since the late 1990s, regardless of numerous attempts to shut them down or ban them.³ The main idea behind these sites is to promote anorexia and bulimia as a lifestyle⁴ involving various rituals of control and purification of the body. Supporters of pro-ana/pro-mia movement use the sites to exchange “thinspirations” which usually take the form of photographic images. Some of these are black-and-white photographs which show “beautiful, beautiful bones”⁵ on emaciated female bodies, in an aesthetics of melancholy and sadness. Most of them, however, are shots of celebrities and stars whom the Western culture designates as objects of admiration and desire. Apart from copying photos from popular magazines, the followers of the “hunger cult” share equally popular “truths” (e.g. “Only thin people are graceful ... Puffy cheeks, double chins, and thick ankles are not attractive ... The models that everyone claims are beautiful, the spitting image of perfection, are any of them fat?”⁶). These “truths” “coexist alongside Christian beliefs and disciplines” (LELWICA, 1999: 5) as unveiled in “Ana Creed,” “Ana Psalm,” and “The Thin Commandments” which these sites almost universally showcase. Ana Creed in particular is an unsettling confession of faith in hunger:

³ Available: <http://family.go.com/parenting/pkg-teen/article-773764-educate-yourself-about-pro-ana-and-pro-mia-sites-t/>. Accessed: 19.2.2014.

⁴ Available: <http://proanalifestyle.blogspot.com/>. Accessed: 19.2.2014.

⁵ Available: <http://anainspiration.webs.com/reasons.htm>. Accessed: 19.2.2014.

⁶ Available: <http://anainspiration.webs.com/reasons.htm>. Accessed: 19.2.2014

I believe in Control, the only force mighty enough to bring order to the chaos that is my world. I believe that I am the most vile, worthless and useless person ever to have existed on this planet, and that I am totally unworthy of anyone's time and attention. I believe that other people who tell me differently must be idiots. If they could see how I really am, then they would hate me almost as much as I do. I believe in oughts, musts and shoulds as unbreakable laws to determine my daily behavior. I believe in perfection and strive to attain it. I believe in salvation through trying just a bit harder than I did yesterday. I believe in calorie counters as the inspired word of god, and memorize them accordingly. I believe in bathroom scales as an indicator of my daily successes and failures I believe in hell, because I sometimes think that I'm living in it. I believe in a wholly black and white world, the losing of weight, recrimination for sins, the abnegation of the body and a life ever fasting.⁷

In mock-biblical style — manifest most clearly in “the Thin Commandments” with their “shalls” and “shall nots” — the three texts are a testimony to the cultural malady mentioned earlier. Here, the body — historically associated with a woman — is brought to a focus but its status is ambivalent. Neither the subject nor the object, it becomes the abject, the (not) me. Disciplined into sacrifice, the body is forced to eat itself until it eventually disappears.⁸ In the world that is chaos and hell, it is through rituals of control that an anorexic strives to establish the clear-cut — “black-and-white” — order.

That the body needs to be controlled, sacrificed on its way to perfection, that it needs to be subjected to the power of the mind, is another lesson which bridges the present day Western culture and the Christian religion. In both, “self-control is praised, while any form of indulgence is disapproved” (BANKS, 1996: 121). However, for the heroines of Anderson's novel, the more extreme dieting, the greater the fantasy of losing control and going out of bounds. This “bulimic impulse” to binge on food, as Marya Hornbacher's proposes, “is more realistic than the anorexic because, for all its horrible nihilism, it understands that the body is inescapable” (HORNBACHER, 1998: 93). Whereas “the bulimic finds herself in excess, too emotional, too passionate,” the anorexic “operates under the astounding illusion that she can escape the flesh, and, by association, the realm of emotions” (p. 93). For Lia and Cassie, any spree of self-indulgence is perceived as sinful, and is therefore followed by a variety of “purifying” rituals (vomiting, overdosing laxatives and diuretics) whose aim is to put the girls back on the right track, and subdue their insubordinate bodies.

⁷ See: <http://thenewpronation.blogspot.com/2012/08/anas-creed.html>. Accessed: 19.2.2014.

⁸ “[W]hat is anorexia but a process of self-consumption in which the subject turns her flesh into a self-consuming artefact and eats herself out?” Pascual NIEVES “Depathologizing Anorexia: The Risks of Life Narratives.” (Available: <http://www.questionia.com/read/1G1-97074189/depatherologizing-anorexia-the-risks-of-life-narratives>).

Ascetic behaviors promoted by popular culture and employed by Lia in particular, are reminiscent of Christian saints who “starved themselves to demonstrate their piety, as penance for their sins, or a strategy to be closer to God” (HALSE, HONEY, BOUGHTWOOD, 2008: 152). Also in this case self-starvation is to be associated with women, as “men were more likely to demonstrate piety by relinquishing their power, money, or prestige” (p. 152). Anorectic behavior patterns exhibited by female saints have prompted a differentiation between “holy anorexia” (Bell qtd. in BANKS, 1996: 122) — “grounded in religious precepts and practices” (p. 122) — and “nervous” (ordinary) anorexia. Conversely, I believe that all anorexia is “holy” and see the connection between the disorder and religion in rituals “that serve as defenses against various drives, impulses, and temptation” (p. 125). It is in point of fact through the association between religion and anorexia that in this article I analyze repetitive, compulsive behaviors of anorexics/bulimics as rituals. In the following, interpretive part of my paper, I will focus on two types of these: rituals of control (associated mostly with anorexia) and those of purification (as epitomized by bulimic rites). First, however, I discuss the perception of the body in Anderson’s novel, as well as the nature of the two heroines’ obsession.

The narrator of Laurie Halse Anderson’s novel, 18-year-old Lia, is a once-recovered anorexic who was hospitalized and “cured” of her disorder; in *Wintergirls* she narrates her relapse into anorexia triggered by severe remorse connected to her friend’s — Cassie’s — tragic death. What also contributes to Lia’s downfall is a whole set of issues commonly associated with teenage drama: her parents’ divorce and its consequences (migration between two different households and the feeling of homelessness), lack of friends and hobbies (other than starvation), as well as low self-esteem combined with acute awareness of cultural expectations a woman should come up to. The girl develops her ritualistic patterns in an attempt to — literally — negotiate her boundaries with the world by invading the borderlines of her body.

The body, therefore, becomes not-Lia: it is an object, a project, a battlefield, and an enemy: “[Her] mouth and tongue and belly have begun to plot against [her]. [She dozes] off in [her] room and bam! [She’s] standing in front of the refrigerator, door open, hand reaching for the cream cheese. Or the butter. Or the leftover lasagna” (ANDERSON, 2009: 183). It is the body whose anatomy and mechanics (i.e. digestion and calorie-burning) Lia understands well but unceasingly disregards or tampers with. What she determinedly ignores in the first place is her body’s dependence on food. The narrator’s constant negation of her body’s needs translates into an act of crossing out parts of her diary: “because I can’t let myself want them because I don’t need a muffin (410), I don’t want an orange (75) or toast (87), and waffles (180) make me gag” (5).⁹ Thus silenced,

⁹ Foods enumerated in the quotation are followed by indications of their calorific value.

the body still refuses to cave in and cooperate. It is a tell-tale body, shivering with cold, bony and pale. It grows extra hair to keep Lia warm, and draws unwanted attention of her parents, her doctors, and her peers.

Somewhat paradoxically, the body that Lia renounces and objectifies is the sole focus of her existence and the subject of the girl's meticulous inspection. Every day, Lia "[counts] her ribs like rosary beads, muttering incantations, fingers curling under the bony cage" (p. 222). The results of her examination, however, are never determined because Lia "[doesn't] know what [she looks] like. [She] can't remember how to look" (p. 84). Simultaneously ethereal and substantial, gigantic and skeletal, Lia's body keeps eluding her:

I lift my arm out of the water. It's a log. Put it back under and it blows even bigger. People see the log and call it a twig. They yell at me because I can't see what they see. Nobody can explain to me why my eyes work different than theirs. Nobody can make it stop.

ANDERSON, 2009: 197

The mirrors Lia turns to in order to diagnosticate herself also prove fallible, transparent and fluid: she is a girl trapped on the other side of them (p. 221), one who "fell off the edge of the map" (p. 259), and now inhabits borderlands (p. 253). She is, as Cassie explains to her, "not dead but ... not alive, either. [She's] a wintergirl, Lia Lia, caught in between two worlds (p. 195). In the space of non-belonging, the narrator experiences reality as slippery and volatile, and has visions of her dead friend, Cassie, following her around and trying to inspire Lia's transgression to "the other side" where she already dwells.

Transgressive as it is, therefore, Lia's body verges on the immaterial, remaining, at the same time, corpse-like, nauseating and fragmented: "The holes in [her] face are filled with sand and pus. The whites of [her] eyes are lemonade puddles spilled over with purple shadows lying under them. [Her] nose is hair and snot, [her] ears are candle wax, [her] mouth is a sewer" (p. 221). When Lia exposes her body to Elijah (her accidental companion), she does so in a parody of striptease during which "[h]e doesn't see [her] breasts or [her] waist or [her] hips. He only sees the nightmare" (p. 259). The monstrosity of the female body is, however, to the greatest extent epitomized by Cassie; hers is the one with "liver damage, distended stomach showing signs of necrosis, wrecked salivary glands, [and] ruptured esophagus" (p. 159), all of which are listed as causes of the girl's death. Cassie was 11 years old when she developed bulimia not to get fat (p. 146) and "[b]y eight grade she ... turned pro, color-coding the beginning of her binges (p. 147). "Stretching and retching and filling up and emptying," Cassie's body is compared to a "bucket" which "was dragged to the well over and over" (p. 158). Treating their weight loss bet with deadly seriousness, both girls move into a "dangerland" (p. 184), and are always on the verge of going

way of all flesh. At the same time, they seem to be driven by the sense of a higher purpose, as they religiously subject their bodies to their addiction to hunger.

In the dangerland that Lia and Cassie belong to, regardless of its numerous traps, all the sign-posts point in the direction of “thinner.” Lia recognizes, however, that she can never possibly lose enough weight, because “[t]he only number that would ever be enough is 0. Zero pounds, zero life, size zero, double zero, zero point. Zero in tennis is love. [She] finally [gets] it” (p. 220). In this slippery reality of gradual disappearance food is so significant and marked that Lia’s schoolmates are named after what they ordered for lunch (“the pizzafish guy,” “a tacosalad girl,” “lettuce and ketchup,” “the spaghetti” (p. 106)), or after their estimated Body Mass Index (“A drama raises her hand — BMI 20. Maybe 19.5” (p. 78)). Like a powerful drug, starving gives Lia the sense of power which is almost magical (“Adrenaline kicks in when you’re starving. That’s what nobody understands. Except for being hungry and cold, most of the time I feel like I can do anything. It gives me superhuman powers of smell and hearing” (p. 189)). At the same time, however, it is food that appears to be endowed with similarly eerie meanings:

Fill your mouth with melting cheese and sausage and tomato sauce — summer fresh/short skirt/dancing tomato sauce — and a slab of pasta as thick as your tongue. Swallow. Light up the stars in your brain, electrify your body, buckle on your smile, and everybody will love you again.

ANDERSON, 2009: 184

Lia and Cassie, therefore, move along two axes, one being their addiction to hunger, and the other their obsession with food. The primary need to control their bodies and appetites is accompanied by a fantasy of letting go and losing control (Lia, for example, wishes she was “a puker” (p. 31)). For this reason, these are the rituals of control and purification that give their lives a semblance of order.

In *anorexia nervosa* in particular, self-control is everything. “It is ascetic, holy,” it is “your claim to fame” (HORNBAKER, 1998: 124). What boils down to the mundane, mathematical tasks of counting, weighing, and measuring, represents, in fact, the victory of the mind over matter, the godly power over life and death. Ritualistic patterns developed by anorexics regulate their lives; these intricate “systems” “are as near and dear to [them] as any saving God (p. 246). If Lia indeed believes in hunger the way one believes in God, hers is a religion one follows secretly, under the table. It requires that she lie to her family, therapists, and doctors, throw food away, exercise clandestinely, sew coins inside her pockets and drink lots of water before compulsory weigh-ins. It also demands constant planning and calculating:

I can't remember what it's like to eat without planning for it, charting the calories and the fat content and measuring my hips and thighs to see if I deserve it and usually deciding no, I don't deserve it, so I bite my tongue until it bleeds and I wire my jaw shut with lies and excuses while a blind tapeworm wraps itself around my windpipe, snuffling and poking for a wet opening to my brain.

ANDERSON, 2009: 209

In her devotion to hunger Lia is an ambitious director of a monodrama in which she simultaneously stars — pretending she ate something, she even “[dabs] a little ketchup at the corners of [her] mouth” (p. 31). What scarce food she does consume is painstakingly cut into many small pieces, taken in slowly, and carefully chewed (ten times before she swallows (p. 65)). Whenever she weighs herself, she uses a digital scale, placed on a hard surface, to be as exact as possible. Calorie values of food are internalized and repeated, as “the beads click on [Lia's] abacus” (p. 91). The girl has to remain vigilant at all times, because

[e]very step in a kitchen is a test — [she is] strong enough to pick up a stick of butter. [She is] strong enough to peel off the paper wrapper, drop a hunk in the pan, and watchlisten smell it melt. [She washes] the greasy smear off my fingertips without tasting it. [She is] passing all the tests today with flying colors.

ANDERSON, 2009: 150

The rituals Lia performs make her feel disciplined and contained, but do not take away the fear of surrendering to temptation. Lia presumes that even

[o]ne bite of lasagna would cause a revolution. One bite, ten bites, the whole tray would pour down my throat. And then I'd eat Oreos. And then I'd eat vanilla ice cream. And Bluberridazzlepops, the rest of the box. And then, just before I exploded, my stomach ripping open and all the food falling into my body cavity, blood flooding me, then I'd have to go to the secret box in my closet and take out the laxatives and die of humiliation in the bathroom.

ANDERSON, 2009: 184

Lia's fantasy of losing control comes true at a bake sale where “[t]he puppet strings of [her] body are cut and [she] can't feel these hands” peeling wrappers off pomegranate cupcakes “and shoving [them] in her. ... Every. Single. One” (p. 203). Lia has to experience profound derealization to do “what Lia would never do,” namely, stuff herself with candy. As soon as the “fit” is over, the girl runs to a bathroom and tries to throw up. Unsuccessful in doing so (although in desperation she squirts liquid soap into her mouth), she punishes herself — or tries to atone for her transgression — by “wolfing down” a handful of laxatives as soon as she gets home (p. 205). This causes her great physical pain, as if someone

“[thrust] a sword into [her] guts” (p. 205), and she spends the night “emptying, emptying, emptying” (p. 206). The strenuous ritual of purging, in turn, leaves her heart “hammering too fast to count,” the sign of her body’s “eating itself, chopping up her muscles and throwing them in the fire so the engine doesn’t seize” (p. 206). It also illustrates how Lia wishes to transform her stubborn body into what it has traditionally been accused of being anyway: a leaky container, one that would not retain food — this “slow-moving sludge that wants to turn into concrete” (p. 167).

The body’s disconcerting openness and fluidity is emphasized when Lia cuts her skin with a fine razor, in a solemn ceremony of opening the body up, against its attempts to keep itself together. The girl “[inscribes] three lines, *hush hush hush*, into [her] skin” (p. 61), simultaneously calming herself down and singularizing her body. Lia’s self-mutilation is not so much an outward expression of anger and aggression, as it is an attempt to wake up and “finally feel something” (p. 223). Scarred, the girl’s body comes to life, with “hot cuts hiking [her] ribs, ladder rungs climbing [her] arms, thick milkweed stalks shooting up [her] thighs” (p. 61). The power this ritual brings is exhilarating, and makes Lia feel “so very, very strong, so iron-boned and magic that the knife draws a third line between two ribs, straight and true” (p. 223). Nonetheless, every release of tension — and a high which comes with it — that Lia allows herself for is perceived as shameful and hence has to be both secretive and temporary (as soon as the purging is over, the toilet is “[scrubbed] ... with a blue cleaner” (p. 206), Band-Aids are “[stuck] on [Lia’s] weeping cuts” (p. 75)). Here too, however, the narrator is punished for going too far when she is caught — red-handed — by Emma, her nine-year-old stepsister, severely traumatized by the event. The rituals of purification then, which Lia and Cassie perform in order to make amends for their lapses, may grant them temporary relief but prove fallible in the end. “The stuffing/puking/stuffing/puking/stuffing/puking [doesn’t] make [Cassie] skinny, it [makes] her cry” (p. 98).

Even though Emma is not a leading character in Anderson’s novel, and although the story finishes on a positive note, it is made very clear that the girl observes her big sister and learns from her. It does not escape her that Lia barely eats; she is worried sick about Lia’s condition and lies to her football coach that Lia is suffering from cancer (p. 26). Emma is also a pudgy girl herself, which worries her mother who tries to control the girl’s food intake. At nine years old, she is almost at the age at which Cassie learned how to throw up in a strange ritual of bonding (“every girl in her cabin at drama camp puked” (p. 147)). In other words, what Anderson’s novel suggests, is that eating disorders, and rituals of hunger associated with them, are a part of a broader cultural phenomenon. One of Lia’s everyday habits, for instance, is consulting pro-ana websites, and listening to “[h]undreds and hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of strange little girls screaming through their fingers. [Her] patient sisters, always waiting for

[her]. [She scrolls] through [their] confessions and rants and prayers, desperation eating [them] one slow bloody bite at a time” (p. 112). The Internet, Lia says, is filled with “hungry girls singing endless anthems while [their] throats bleed and rust and fill up with loneliness” (p. 175). As Lia chants her daily self-deprecating incantations — “stupid/ugly/stupid/bitch/stupid/fat” — the inevitable question appears of why she would hate herself so much that her “every heartbeat [screams] that every single thing is wrong with [her]” (p. 158). Why would anyone throw up so frequently and violently that their esophagus ruptures, and their last words are “Tell Lia she won [the weight loss bet]” (p. 219)? “Why?” — Lia answers — “is the wrong question. Ask ‘Why not?’” (p. 158). In the cultural context that Lia is inscribed within, however, this question remains open.

In the substantial body of theory devoted to eating disorders the question of what causes anorexia and bulimia has been variously tackled. Even though there is no consensus among researchers regarding the connection between *anorexia mirabilis* (or “holy anorexia” of the Middle Ages) and *anorexia nervosa* — with some scholars emphatically separating the two¹⁰ and others claiming that “contemporary therapists have created a new disease from an old one by discussing the same fasting behavior within a psychological rather than theological discourse” (KRUGOVOY SILVER, 2002: 142) — the feminist framework raises important questions of how Western culture and Judeo-Christian religion regulate women’s bodies, and allows for the interpretation of anorexic/bulimic rituals as religious ones. In Anna Krugovoy Silver’s words, “both anorexia nervosa and religious fasting ... operate on a dualistic axis, in which appetite is associated with the body, which is then dissociated from the mind or spirit” (pp. 148—149). Therefore, in order to free herself from an eating disorder, a woman must, as Michele Mary Lelwica suggests, distance herself from the “sociopolitical matrix in which she lives” (LELWICA, 1998: 131) and see the Panopticon in which she is “symbolically imprisoned” (KRUGOVOY SILVER, 2002: 175). “We must question the dualistic paradigms and values that give them meaning” — writes Lelwica — “along with the popular salvation myth that circulates their narrow ‘truths’ and the patriarchal legacies that support them” (LELWICA, 1998: 127). The awakening of such critical consciousness can be interpreted as a “kind of religious conversion, an awakening to a bigger picture and a different way of seeing” (p. 130). For Lia, however, salvation comes from within her dying body: “[her] arms fight the blankets, and [her] feet find the floor. They are not waiting for me to make a decision. They’re going” (ANDERSON, 2009: 268). It is, in other words, Lia’s body that decides to live. Whereas Western tradition teaches women to make their bodies “not-matter” (Pascual), “cultivating a new awareness means paying attention to its embodied basis” (LELWICA, 1998: 130), and the

¹⁰ See, for example, Joan Jacobs Brumberg’s *Fasting Girls. The Emergence of Anorexia nervosa as a Modern Disease*, pp. 41—45

transgression of the body-mind duality. The rituals of control and purification are abandoned, and the sole ritual Lia practices in order to cure herself, is one of “[spinning] and [weaving] and [knitting her] words and vision until a life starts to take shape (ANDERSON, 2009: 277). Correspondingly, Lelwica lists retelling of stories as an important step towards self-healing, and envisages girls and women “opening their mouths not to gorge or vomit but to contest and transform the erasure of their longings and struggles ...” (LELWICA, 1998: 157). “Spinning the silk threads of [her] story, weaving the fabric of [her] world” (ANDERSON, 2009: 277), Lia dismisses — not without regret — the beguiling tales of the Western culture, and looks for deliverance “outside the illusory security of the Garden” (LELWICA, 1998: 138).

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