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## **Disordered Eating, Agency, and Social Class: Elaine Mar's *Paper Daughter***

*For instance, the split between the bodily form of the commodity and its purely ideal mental form, that is, its value...is implicated in the decline of status and the rise of the inner self...and the feminine was, historically, most carefully coded at the level of conduct, where appearance became the signifier of conduct; to look was to be. The construction of appearance became a cultural property of the person, the means by which women were categorized, known and placed by others. Appearance operated as the mechanism for authorization, legitimation and de-legitimation.<sup>i</sup>*

Beverly Skeggs, a sociologist and feminist critic, is known for influential contribution to working-class studies, *Formations of Class and Gender: Becoming Respectable* (1997). Written as ethnography, *Formations* discusses the identity politics surrounding social class in the United Kingdom; in particular, it details how working-class mothers live class, specifically in terms of how they negotiate their roles as caretakers with work. Skeggs draws upon much of her research in *Formations* to write *Class, Self, Culture* (2004), where she explores the different ways class circulates as a form of value, and, as show above in the epigraph, how value is prescribed to different bodies. Skeggs analyzes organizations like the International Momentary Fund as well as recent academic theory to argue against studies, primarily sociological ones, which suggest that class is in decline.

This paper draws upon Skeggs's research on class, value, and bodies to examine the relationship between disordered eating and class identity in *Paper Daughter*: the memoir of Elaine Mar, a Chinese-American woman who emigrated with her family from the Toishan region of mainland China in 1972 to a working-class neighborhood in Denver, Colorado. As noted above, Skeggs argues that one's "value" is determined by how "pure" their mental "form" is or rather, how successful they are at maintaining self-control. Contemporary American culture admires self-control since it reaffirms Puritanical philosophy that largely influenced and shaped the nature of class identity. Excess is intertwined with self-control; women must limit their

“excess” to increase the “class” of their “signifier”: their physical appearance. The female body must not be too excessive in terms of body fat/size since the physical “appearance” is the “signifier” or the text by which “others” read, interpret, and classify the female as low, middle, or high-class (Skeggs, 100). Females must also limit their “excess” by practicing modesty and sexual restraint. Being too promiscuous, sensual, and/or taking pleasure in bodily sensations relates to embodying “vulgarity...disgust”: the aura of the lower class/working-class woman (102). Contrarily, depriving oneself of bodily impulses relates to the middle to upper-class woman.

Mar explores this relationship of excess and class identity in *Paper Daughter*. A close examination of Mar’s disordered eating shows readers how her ED stems from a *class inferiority complex*.<sup>ii</sup> Gendered as female, and classed as inferior due to her immigrant status and working-class background, classifies Mar as the “other” or what award-winning novelist and feminist critic, Dorothy Allison, describes as the “they”: the ungrateful poor, the ones who are not the “real” people of the “we” (13-4).<sup>iii</sup> Mar utilizes her ED because she believes it will help her join the “we,” thereby limiting her “excess” of Skeggs’s “disgust” and/or low-class upbringing. In other words, disordered eating is a way for Mar to achieve the American dream: the upper-class American woman. This upper-class woman wears idolized brand-name lines that symbolize the American ideal (e.g. Izod shirts) but more importantly, this woman is afforded the opportunity to ponder and explore the world of American dieting. Dieting is, after all, a luxury available only to those who have the financial resources to waste, throw away, or limit their caloric intake.

Traditionally, patients diagnosed with an ED purposefully decide to diet; Mar does not intentionally diet. Rather, her ED stems from wanting to attain self-autonomy as a Chinese-American teenager. Mar reflects,

Being a traditional Chinese, Mother didn't see me as an individual with needs separate from my family's...my money was their money. Any time I wanted to buy anything, I had to ask my parents for it specifically. (216).

Eating disorders are about generating a sense of agency. By controlling her intake, Mar acquires a conduct that is uniquely hers; contrary to “money,” it is a behavior that does not require the consent of her parents. She can practice disordered eating patterns at her own volition. For Mar, this freedom signifies a sense of owning the ED behavior, which, in effect, projects a sense of self-possession to the outside world.<sup>iv</sup>

As a Chinese-American immigrant, Mar's cultural identity is liminal, split between two worlds: western/American versus eastern/Chinese.<sup>v</sup> Through school, media, and other external influences, Mar sees how western culture emphasizes self-autonomy. While these public spaces emphasize individuality, Mar's private space, her home, enforces collectivity and filial piety. She receives mixed messages from the public (e.g. western world) and the private (e.g. eastern world); baffled by this cultural disconnect, Mar begins to internalize the opposing notions of how she should act, feel, and ultimately, be. This liminal space of cultural identity perplexes Mar, provoking her to utilize her ED to generate a sense of fixity in the midst of being liminal. Mar's mother repeatedly “instruct[s]” her, teaching her the proper heteronormative gender roles that she believes are appropriate for a woman to embody (166).<sup>vi</sup> The ED allows for Mar to symbolically own agency. By practicing disordered eating, Mar purchases the illusion of self-autonomy. She leaves the liminal space, selecting the western/American culture identity;

through disordered eating, Mar convinces herself that she achieves the American dream of individuality. Mar writes,

I couldn't even imagine asking them [i.e. her parents] for an Izod shirt. First of all, it was too expensive. Second, it wasn't necessary...Fashion was foolish, a luxury we couldn't afford...I needed to *buy* the shirt, fair and square, counting out the bills at the front *counter for everyone to see*. There was only one solution—my lunch money. (emphasis added, 218).

Mar pines for the entire experience that encompasses the Izod shirt; the act of purchasing the shirt represents power. She emphasizes that she “needed to *buy* the shirt...counting out the bills...*for everyone to see*,” suggesting that Mar will gain the semblance of self-confidence through the performance of shopping. This performance demands that the actor (e.g. Mar) possess power (e.g. money) to purchase exorbitant items like the “Izod” shirt. By doing so, Mar the performer shows off “for everyone to see” how much she can acquire through shopping. More importantly, though, this performance illustrates how she is afforded the opportunity to exercise the power to shop, thereby illuminating her sense of agency in the act of American consumerism.

Unfortunately, this performance of shopping only leads to Mar's downfall into a self-destructive “I,” not an empowered one. Mar describes the origins of this “I”:

Accustomed to being treated as an object and hearing such blatant criticisms [e.g. how Aunt Bik-Yuk and cousin Dani poke and prod at her body, how her mother criticizes her for having moles, etc] I had no filter against my schoolmates' taunts...I came to believe that being Chinese in itself constituted ugliness and asexuality...I'd internalize their

criticisms so completely that I supplied taunts for them, silently and constantly, inside my own head. (220)

Mar's eating disorder is her "filter" for these externalized "blatant criticisms." The ED creates a space of emptiness, leading Mar to believe that she has attained self-mastery and agency by not embodying Skeggs's "excess/disgust." That is, disordered eating limits Mar's "excess" since it allows her to physically shed off the layers of flesh that she believes drag her down the social ladder and, additionally, the criticisms that the external world (e.g. family, friends, media) dump on her. ED eliminates the toxic skepticisms of others; it helps Mar achieve the American dream (i.e. according to Skeggs's brief account of Puritanical thought) of high-class taste.

Media and educational influences reinforce Mar's idolization of this high class taste; they market dieting as a means to acquire it. She describes,

Nothing in popular culture contradicted my assumption of Asian as ugly. The image of beauty during this time was uniformly blonde, buxom, and white. *Farrah Fawcett* was the epitome of female sexuality, the image we girls strove to emulate. Flat-chested, black-haired, and bespectacled, I was doomed to failure. *All I had* was thinness, which my friends complimented on and admired...I *worked* to maintain this slenderness, believing in an inverse relationship between waist size and beauty. (emphasis added, 220).

Mar and "other girls" strive to embody a specific class of the "ideal" American woman: "Farrah Fawcett." Blue-eyed, blonde, and white, Fawcett was the "epitome" of female sexuality. In the early 1980's, which was presumably during Mar's teen years, Fawcett's image saturated the media. She advertised for various companies like Wella Baslam: the expensive, high-class hair

and make-up cosmetic line.<sup>vii</sup> Mar consumes Fawcett's image on a daily basis which reinforces the notion that looking other than "blonde, buxom" (i.e. "Asian) is "ugly."

Mar convinces herself that the closest way she can embody a Farrah Fawcett look is through food deprivation. As Mar notes, the ED is "all I [i.e. she] *had*" which shows how starvation is a practice that Mar can purchase. Mar works hard "to maintain this slenderness," especially when classmates like Helen suspect that she is "too cheap" to buy her own lunch. Refusing to eat lunch or accept Helen's taunts, Mar cultivates the illusion that she climbs up the social ladder. Mar's "work" of throwing away of food, eating half of it, and eating slowly, is all a way that she purchases a Farrah Fawcett image. That is, her emaciated body is her product: her way of attaining self-autonomy, and therefore, leaving the liminal space, embodying a more American cultural identity.

Mar finally realizes that this self-autonomy is a delusion upon attending the summer camp at Cornell University. At TASP, Mar describes bingeing profusely on potato salad and chocolate chip cookies. She reflects,

I tried to fast the next morning, but never made it past lunch. It was too difficult to focus on not eating when the conversations around me were so interesting. As the summer progressed, I lost the hyper vigilance over the other parts of my physical being: I stopped wearing make-up...I ate...I barely noticed the food. It was only energy, used to feed my brain. At the age of sixteen years and ten months, I suddenly discovered that I needed food to think clearly. (270).

For the first time, Mar realizes that she needs food to not only physically survive but to intellectually thrive. Food allows Mar to "think clearly," making her an active participant in those "interesting conversations." She becomes a more valued member of her TASP

community. With her ED, Mar competed against herself to see how long she could last without food; how strong she could be, to tough it out (221). Surprisingly, competition is also Mar's way out of her ED. However, her recovery process is a healthy competition where she competes with her peers. She utilizes her now nourished brain power to think critically. Along with the other students at TASP, Mar binges on products like ice-cream, cookies, potato salad, and English muffins — all of which are traditionally classified as American (270-1). As one of my colleagues, Kathryn Yankura notes, Mar binges on these products to symbolically consume a more American cultural identity. Though, to add to Yankura's point, it is not just the consumption of American foods that leads to Mar's American cultural identity but the circumstances in which she consumes these foods. Before attending TASP, Mar's mother attempts to heal her daughter, giving her a bowl of herbal soup which Mar stubbornly refuses to eat. She describes,

I choked every time I took a sip, hoping that Mother wouldn't force me to drink more, but of course she would: *The ingredients cost one hundred dollars...* The real reason for my resistance was the fear that these potions would work. I didn't want to gain weight. I didn't want *to lose control of my body*. (emphasis added, 222).

Mar refuses to eat the soup to exercise her independence from her mother. At TASP, there is no mother to “force” Mar to eat the potato salad; she chooses to do so at her volition. By earning a full scholarship to attend TASP, Mar symbolically pays for her own recovery. In contrast to the soup scene, Mar is less inclined to feel guilty or in debt towards anyone since no one paid “one hundred dollars” for the products she consumes at TASP. Mar is the one who finds out about TASP, applies, and is accepted; the entire process of applying and attending TASP suggests that

Mar has moved up the social-class ladder. That is, her intellectual capacity pays for her recovery, opening new doors for her educational and vocational pursuits.

At TASP, Mar realizes that eating food does not ascribe “disgust” and/or “excess” to one’s body/persona. She understands that nourishment allows the body and mind to properly function. At the same time, though, she still views the physical pleasures of sex to be low-class. Mar reflects, “I suffered my crushes, but continued to view sexual desire as wrong. I thought of desire as a weakness to be overcome by intellect — the smarter you were, the less need for sex” (270). As Skeggs notes, “excessive sexuality” poses a threat to the moral order of Western civilization (100). Historically, the Western world classifies two types of femininity: working-class and bourgeois femininity. A working-class woman performs her gender excessively; she “works” hard” at performing her femininity (e.g. wearing excessive make-up, dressing promiscuously, styling her hair lavishly, etc.) A bourgeois woman conducts the least amount of work to perform her femininity. She values the natural look: an appearance where the woman does not perform any work to do her gender. Engaging in pleasure is associated with the working-class woman who promiscuously displays her excessive bodily signifiers in the public space; by doing so, this woman is prone to be “consumed” by numerous men and therefore, deemed less “pure” in the Puritanical sense since she is readily accessible to others, particularly men. The working-class woman is improper, wrong—her “value” is low. In opposition to her is the bourgeois woman who does not entertain her bodily desires. She stays in the private sphere, which, in effect, closes her off to outsiders (e.g. men) that could “prey” on her and thus taint her “purity”—her high-class value as a proper woman.

While Mar recovers from her disordered eating patterns, she delves into another form of deprivation: sexual starvation. Mar restrains her sexual desires in order to exemplify bourgeois

femininity where restraint and modesty are markers of high-class. She practices bourgeois femininity, or what she notes as the “Platonic ideal” as she refuses to engage in relationships with crushes like “Jim” (270). Though Mar recovers from her ED, she attains the semblance of self-confidence by depriving herself of pleasure; like the traditional bourgeois woman, she does not make any efforts towards performing her gender. At TASP, she describes how she no longer wears make-up, wears the same t-shirt she slept in to class, wears glasses instead of contact lenses, etc (270). Mar is indifferent towards her exterior appearance which is positive in light of her ED recovery. However, it also suggests that women like Mar, who move up the social class ladder, should not care too excessively about their appearance. If they do, then they run the risk of tainting their moral appearance — an essential characteristic attributed to bourgeois femininity.

Mar’s ED recovery coupled with her indifference towards performing her gender may be why readers conclude *Paper Daughter* on a surprisingly, unpromising note. The memoir concludes with Mar at Harvard: one of the most prestigious universities known internationally. Nevertheless, ending at Harvard is not the happily finale. Mar resists the traditional American memoir narrative by concluding with a non-closed ending to suggest that even if she has literally moved up the social ladder (i.e. in terms of attending Harvard and becoming an established writer), she still has not emotionally left her working-class/immigrant background. Mar remains in Aaron Russo’s liminal space of cultural/class identities. This identity is a disjointed, conflicted one since she continually seeks to become better, higher in taste and class through the eyes of others —through the eyes of Allison’s “we.”

As readers, and particularly as educators, *Paper Daughter* invites dynamic classroom discussion. By examining the non-closed ending of *Paper Daughter*, readers see how the text

resists prescribing to society's static social constructs (e.g. race, class, gender.) That is, the memoir deconstructs these seemingly fixed categories, recognizing the fluidity of these cultural personas and spaces. *Paper Daughter* traces the trajectory of that "model minority" who "makes it" but is left somewhat dissatisfied; though she has acquired the "American Harvard Dream," her sense of rootedness and connection to a homeland as well as to a singular cultural identity remains fissured. This fissure is in large part due, as discussed earlier, to Mar's "hyphenated" identity as a Chinese-American woman. The non-closed ending, then, challenges readers and educators to explore how their own biases and subject position influences how they arrive at their reading of Mar as well as to the text itself; through this exploration, readers and educators recognize how they "read" others in their society, which, in effect, hopefully leads to building cultural bridges of understanding rather than fixed bridges of the "they" and "we."

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Notes

<sup>i</sup> See Skeggs's "Thinking Class: The Historical Reproduction of Concepts of Class" in *Class, Self, Culture* (32, 100).

<sup>ii</sup> In the course of this paper, I will use the abbreviation "ED" to signify "eating disorder."

<sup>iii</sup> See Dorothy Allison's "A Question of Class" in *Talking about Sex, Class, and Literature* (12-36).

<sup>iv</sup> See Nicole Moulding's "Constructing the Self in Mental Health Practice: Identity, Individualism and the Feminization of Deficiency" (61). Moulding provides a decent overview of eating disordered patterns and behaviors, documenting how gender and ethnic identities influence cases of eating disorders. However, as feminist critics like Adair note, Moulding does not discuss the implications of class or more specifically, how one's class identity influences disordered eating patterns. For a detailed discussion on the history of how feminist studies has neglected to examine class identity in relation to feminism, see "Vivyan C. Adair's Class Absences: Cutting Class in Feminist Studies" (575-603).

<sup>v</sup> See Russo's "Conclusion: The View From Breezewood" in *Broken Boot-Straps: Representing and Teaching the Class Liminal in the Contemporary American School*. Russo discusses liminality in relation to class identity. Liminality/class identity is an issue in *Paper Daughter* that one can readily examine; though, I refer to liminality in this specific part of my paper to cultural identity. Specifically, I argue how Mar is torn between two different cultures, thereby situating her in the "liminal space" of her cultural identity.

<sup>vi</sup> Hetero-normative relates to heteronormativity: the notion that people fall into distinct gender identities i.e. male and female.) The assumption is that heterosexuality is the normal

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sexual orientation. A heteronormative perspective is based on biological sex, gender identity, and gender roles. Mar's mother is the paradigm of a hetero-normative outlook; she continually "instructs" her daughter to be obedient, submissive, and quiet. These are all characteristics that are traditionally classified as feminine.

<sup>vii</sup> See Robert Chadwick's "The politics of Farrah's body: The female icon as cultural embodiment" to explore the origins of Farrah Fawcett, the feminine icon/paradigm. Chadwick focuses on Fawcett as a cultural negotiator and mediator in shifting social and political climates.

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