

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

By Roxanne N. Rashedi

*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. . —Beverly Skeggs*

In her ethnography *Formations of Class and Gender: Becoming Respectable*, sociologist Beverly Skeggs discusses the identity politics surrounding social class in the United Kingdom and details how working-class mothers negotiate their roles as caretakers within the confines of their class. In *Class, Self, Culture*, Skeggs explores the different ways class circulates as a form of value, and, as noted in the epigraph, how value is prescribed to different bodies. That is, how a woman “construct[s her] appearance” is tightly linked with, and influences her social rank (100). The more excessive a woman’s appearance, (i.e. clothing, make-up, hair style, etc), the less respect or “value” she holds in society and vice-versa.

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 the purity of their mental form, that is, how successful they are at maintaining self-control. Self-control is ever present in contemporary American society through the influences of Puritanical philosophy that largely shaped American 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

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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 behavior stems from a *class inferiority complex*. Gendered as female, and classed as inferior due to her immigrant status and working-class background, Mar is classified as the “other” or, what 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). Mar utilizes her eating disorder 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 limit their caloric intake.

While most with an eating disorder decide to diet, Mar does not intentionally diet. Instead, her eating disorder 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 behavior, which, in effect, projects a sense of self-possession to the outside world.<sup>1</sup>

As a Chinese-American immigrant, Mar’s cultural identity is liminal, split between two worlds: western/American and eastern/Chinese.<sup>2</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 eating disorder to generate a sense of fixity in the midst of being liminal. Mar’s mother teaches her to be obedient, submissive, and quiet-- heteronormative gender roles that she believes are appropriate for a woman (166). The eating disorder allows Mar a sense of agency and a way out of the liminal space. Through disordered eating, Mar convinces herself that she achieves the American dream of individuality. Mar writes,

I couldn’t even imagine asking [my 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 illustrates the power to shop, and the sense of agency in the act of American consumerism.

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 acts as a filter for these “blatant criticisms.” The eating disorder 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. Her eating disorder 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.

The media reinforces 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. (220)

Mar convinces herself that the closest way she can embody a *Farrah Fawcett* look is through food deprivation. As Mar notes, the eating disorder is “all [she] had” which shows how starvation is a practice that Mar can own. 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.

During a summer program at Cornell University, Mar’s illusion of self-autonomy through disordered eating begins to dissipate. She describes bingeing profusely on potato salad and chocolate chip cookies and 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)

Mar realizes that she needs food not only physically, but intellectually as well. She needs food to “think clearly,” and participate in conversations. She becomes a more valued member of the summer program community. With her eating disorder, 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 illness. However, her recovery process is a healthy competition where she competes with her peers. She utilizes her nourished intellect to think critically. Along with the other students at the summer camp, Mar binges on products like ice-cream, cookies, potato salad, and English muffins — all of them American foods (270-1). As my colleague Kathryn Yankura notes, Mar binges on these products to symbolically consume an American identity. 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 the summer camp, 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 as a way of exercising her independence. At the summer camp, however, 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 the program, 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 Cornell. Mar is the one who finds out about the summer program and applies. The process of applying and attending the program suggests that Mar has moved up the social-class ladder. Her intellectual capacity pays for her recovery, opening new doors for her educational and vocational pursuits.

At the summer program, 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. The working-class woman performs her gender excessively through promiscuous dress, excessive make-up or hair. The 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 displays her bodily in the public space. By

doing so, this woman is prone to be “consumed” by numerous men and deemed less “pure” in the Puritanical. The working-class woman is improper, and has little “value.” In contrast, the bourgeois woman does not entertain her bodily desires. She stays in the private sphere, which closes her off to outsiders (men) who might 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” by refusing to engage in an emotional and/or physical intimate relationship. During her summer at Cornell, Mar is attracted to her peer Jim, but quickly dismisses the notion of being Jim’s girlfriend or even exploring her attraction towards him (270). Engaging in such forms of intimate attraction would taint Mar’s identity and therefore, lessen her social value as a Chinese-American woman who has gained social value by practicing modesty and sexual restraint—markers which, as discussed by Skeggs, characterize bourgeois femininity (270). Though Mar recovers from her eating disorder, 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 the summer program, she describes how she no longer wears make-up, wears the same t-shirt she slept in to class and wears glasses instead of contact lenses (270). Mar is indifferent to her appearance, perhaps a positive development in light of her recovery. However, it also suggests that women like Mar, who move up the social ladder, should not care too excessively about their appearance. a different form of self-control. If they do, they run the risk of tainting their moral appearance — an essential characteristic attributed to bourgeois femininity.

Mar’s recovery coupled with her indifference towards performing her gender may be why *Paper Daughter* concludes on a surprisingly unpromising note. At the end of the memoir, Mar is at Harvard. Nevertheless, Mar resists the traditional American memoir narrative by concluding with an open ending to suggest that even if she has moved up the social ladder (by attending a prestigious university and becoming an established writer), she has still 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.”

*Paper Daughter* invites dynamic discussion for readers and educators. By examining the non-closed ending of *Paper Daughter*, readers see how the text resists prescribing to society’s static constructs of race, class and gender. The memoir deconstructs these seemingly fixed categories, recognizing the fluidity of these cultural personas and spaces. *Paper Daughter* traces the trajectory of the “model minority” who “makes it” but is left somewhat dissatisfied. Even though she has acquired the “American Harvard Dream,” Mar’s sense of rootedness and connection to a homeland as well as to a singular cultural identity remains fissured. This is in large part due to Mar’s hyphenated identity as a Chinese-American woman. The ending, then, challenges readers and educators to explore how their own biases and subject position influence their reading of Mar as well as the text itself. Through this exploration, readers and educators recognize how they “read” others in their society, which might lead to building bridges of understanding between the “they” and “we.”

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Nicole Moulding's "Constructing the Self in Mental Health Practice: Identity, Individualism and the Feminization of Deficiency" (61) 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>2</sup> In "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.

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