*Essay Award Winner 2003 (First Prize)*

# Artful Hunger:
# Exploring Cultural Influences and the Lives of Women Coping with Self-Harm

**by Jenna Flannigan**

While the poem "hungergraphs," by Sylvia Legris, deals mainly with the internal life of a self-harming woman, it is overshadowed by whispers of the oppressive and uncaring outside world. Conversely, "The Hungry Cookie Tin" presents images of a woman-harming culture, with glimpses into the lives of women coping with self-destructive behaviors. In this way, my artwork "The Hungry Cookie Tin" becomes an inverse reflection of "hungergraphs." The two pieces are connected by two overarching elements: contradiction and contrast, and the dehumanization of women. Within these primary themes, the works address the realities experienced by coping women, as well as the discourses within the patriarchal culture at large. The direct contradictions in these works reflect the contrasts that exist within the lives of women, as well as the discrepancy between societal expectations of women and the prejudices against them.

There is also a great deal of contention about eating disorders and self-mutilation within the research community. This debate is displayed by the great number of diverse, and sometimes conflicting, theories on these subjects. Although in some cases therapy can help a coping woman heal and strengthen her voice, other clinical approaches can serve to further disembody women. The poem and the tin both examine the theme of dehumanization to the point of death. Women are dehumanized by a culture obsessed with the female form, as well as by their own need to deal with emotional pain through carving their bodies.

As the culture further objectifies women, and women further disassociate their minds from their bodies, death becomes a very real possibility. In the end, the two works differ in the way they reject both cultural harm and self-harm. While reflecting the main themes in "hungergraphs," "The Hungry Cookie Tin" is able to arrive at a different form of cultural rebellion and strategy for coping with trauma.

While "hungergraphs" presents the conflicting image of a self-starving woman who is obsessed with food, the poem also addresses the contradictory messages with which women grow up. Like many women suffering from eating disorders, the woman in "hungergraphs" is captivated by food. The food versus thinness contrast begins in the first section of the poem with the image of the emaciated woman balancing an Oxford English Dictionary on her pelvis bones and tucking The Joy of Cooking beneath.

After examining The Joy of Cooking, and trying out the test with another large book, I concluded that the woman described would have to be so thin as to have almost no body matter between her pelvic bones and above her lower spine. Her body would be so starved that, as Levenkron explains, her internal organs would have atrophied and

shrunken (85). The picture of The Joy of Cooking placed on the woman's starving body is one of stark contrast because for this woman, food holds no joy.

The image of food against starvation occurs again with the use of food words in the poet's dream description. The fact that the woman experiences dreams at all seems contradictory, since she already commented that she suffers from insomnia, as do most women dealing with eating disorders (Brownell et.al. 429).

After describing a dream scene of branches "piled like bones" (Legris 443), the poet imagines herself carving watermelon, kitchen linoleum, and finally, her own arms like potatoes. Not only does this sequence recreate the contrast of food against starvation, but it also makes a culture critique. The girl lost in the forest can be seen as the poet, or any woman, caught in a maze of mixed signals. The bone-like branches and twigs can be representative of the stick-figure models of female beauty, or as the dead bodies of women who have been killed by the oppressive culture. The latter representation has much larger meaning because it implicates oppression as the source of women's self-harming behaviors; yet the two cannot be separated.

By portraying only weak, passive, stick-thin figures as the epitome of femininity, the culture condones the objectification and manipulation of women's bodies, which encourages physical abuse. This idea is further expressed through the image of watermelon being carved into "perfect pink balls." (Legris 443). The poet starts with a large, whole fruit, and wants to cut it into much smaller, identical balls, resembling nothing of the original. The placement of the word kitchen on the same line, right next to the pink balls suggests that the two ideas are connected. The pink balls come to represent the culture's ideal women: much less than the original, from which they were perfectly carved, and ready to serve beside the kitchen.

Although the poet dreams the carving of the female form, she rejects the kitchen as she slashes the floor into a series of "Xs." The "Xs" can be representative of the female chromosome, further connecting the watermelon balls to women, or they can also be seen as errors. Like the indicators for mistakes on an exam, the repeated "X" signals something is very wrong. The placement of this sequence after the description of the girl lost in the bone-filled forest makes it even more powerful because it shows how the culture places contradictory demands upon women. The culture will encourage the harm of women, while also demanding that women fit a beauty mold and be the caretakers of the home.

The poet hints at this world of conflict throughout her work. After a series of red on white images she comments: "the contrast/ so stark." (Legris 444). Even the arrangement of the words is done in contrasting sequences, with one section of lines made up of long, run on sentences followed by a single word standing on its own. Legris is not just commenting on the world of a self-starving woman, but also the conflicting images and ideas put forth by the dominant culture.

While mirroring the main themes presented by Legris, the imagery of"The Hungry Cookie Tin" focuses more on cultural contradictions with some insight into the lives of self-harming women. There are a number of pictures which overlap sumptuous food with very thin bodies. One of the most striking images is the picture of a very thin woman's torso inside a sprinkle donut. It is unclear whether the donut is very large, or the woman is very tiny, but in either case, the two pictures do not belong together.

Our culture's love of fatty foods and love of thinness are in direct conflict and create an impossible situation. The picture of Wilma Flintstone holding the enormous meat platter continues this pattern. The meat of the drum stick is about three times thicker than Wilma's waist. The bone of the meat is thicker than her legs. The impossibility of this image is obvious. Wilma is turning her face away from the meat, as she is preparing to bring it to someone else. She is tiny and servile - the culture's perfect woman.

The feminine ideal is seen again in 'the future homemakers of America' image. These women are Sylvia Legris' "perfect pink balls."(443). They represent women's willingness to fulfill the cookie-cutter ideal. Their image conflicts grossly with Carrie, the half bloody girl next door from Stephen King's thriller novel Carrie, later turned into a Hollywood film. But these four future homemakers are connected to Carrie by "Sex, Lies and Salad Forks." They are the same sex, have been fed the same lies by the culture, but differ in their use of the salad fork.

Perhaps all five eat salad to stay thin, but Carrie is just as likely to use the salad fork in a deadly manner. Her mutilation of self and others becomes a rebellion against the hurtful behavior of her peers. Carrie also gives a glimpse into the lives of women who have been traumatized but have no healthy methods for coping with emotional pain. In the same way many women who suffer from self-abuse feel they have no options, Carrie literally has no place to turn; she is not safe at home in her private sphere and is tormented by her classmates in the public sphere. Using her telekinetic abilities, Carrie is able to externalize her pain and take her revenge against those who have harmed her; yet this revenge also tears Carrie apart. Real women don't have the option of telekinetic vengeance, and instead they "deal with their internal pain by picking at their skin, burning themselves or cutting themselves with razors or knives." (Pipher 157) Like the half normal, half bloody image of Carrie, a self-mutilating woman often appears on one side to be leading a relatively healthy life, while the other side of her life is dominated by self-abuse. (Pipher 159).

The type of trauma which elicits self-mutilation can vary from experiences of ostracism to sexual harassment or assault. In most cases it is connected to some form of oppression which impacts women almost exclusively. (Pipher 158).
Another area of contrast in both works is the stark difference between starving as a coping mechanism versus starving because of poverty.

“hungergraphs” makes reference to this idea when the woman describes her life in terms of a sweatshop. Once more there is a direct clash, this time between the women of sweatshops who toil for hours to eat with women who work to avoid eating at all costs. “The Hungry Cookie Tin” makes a similar statement with the placement of the words “sweat yourself skinny” beside a woman hauling a mud brick. Across from this image, a low fat snack with emphasis on its 65 calorie total sits nestled next to a quote about refugees who subsist on only 1000 calories per day.

These messages remind me of the somewhat contentious conception that eating disorders are “a problem for the prosperous” (Pipher 174). These attitudes are also reminiscent of the contrast between female genital mutilation and the rising trend of vaginal cosmetic surgery. Disordered eating versus forced starvation follows a pattern similar to the idea that when FGM “is performed on healthy girls in some African countries . . . Westerners denounce it as genital mutilation; in the U.S. of A., it’s called cosmetic enhancement.” (Scheers, 245). At the same time, as Thompson points out, women living in poverty in Western countries can suffer from both eating disorders and sexual abuse (208), thus blurring the assumed class boundaries surrounding these issues.

Instead, one can see that self-starvation, imposed starvation, and sexual abuse are issues which have the potential to effect all women. The major connection between these issues is their occurrence within hierarchical cultures which privilege men above women and emphasize the importance of female appearance.

Both works accurately reflect the conflicting views within the research community in regards to the causes and treatment of eating disorders. Legris makes reference to an O.E.D. ,which I have taken to mean the Oxford English Dictionary, a book about the meanings of things. She takes this long name, and shrinks it -- a nod to the reductionist theories on self-harm.

An example of reductionism comes from the 1999 guide Treating Mental Illness. On anorexia, the guide comments that “No one really knows the cause of anorexia, in part because there has been so little research into the factors that contribute to the disorder.” (Nathan et.al. 26). The guide raises a few of the supposed factors, but makes no mention of trauma and oppression, the two elements central to Becky Thompson’s 1994 research.

Also absent is the statistic quoted in Thompson’s work that “between one-third and two-thirds of women who have eating problems have been abused” (Oppenheimer et al.; Root and Fallon; qut. in Thompson 207). The guide also makes the rather contentious claim that only 1 to 2 women out of 1000 have symptoms of anorexia, while 1 to 2 women out of 100 will suffer symptoms of bulimia sometime in their lives.(Nathan et.al. 26, 32).

In direct contradiction to these statistics comes the work of Naomi Wolf, who suggests that the high end of the figures show that out of ten women on a university campus, 2 will

suffer from anorexia and 6 will suffer from bulimia at some point during their schooling. (Wolf 182). Both works are contradicted again, by Niva Parin's work which suggests that the most common form of eating disorder falls into the Diagnostic Statistics Manual under "Eating Disorders Not Otherwise Specified," a category not even mentioned by the other two works. Any type of abnormal eating pattern which causes harm to the sufferer, often termed disordered eating, falls under this third category (Piran 370).

One thing the researchers agree on is that anorexia, bulimia and 'eating disorders not otherwise specified' are disorders which effect women at least 10 times more often than men. (I tried to display this statistic in a very obvious way with a picture of ten thin, scantily clad women taken from the same magazine as the picture of one man placed beside them.)

When questioning why eating disorders strike so many more women than men, the guide for Treating Mental Disorders draws another blank: "No one knows why there is such a discrepancy . . ." (Nathan et.al. 28). Although Betty Friedan was addressing a different issue, the following statement could very well be applied to this widespread problem: "For human suffering there is a reason; perhaps the reason has not been found because the right questions have not been asked, or pressed far enough." (Friedan 267).

Naomi Wolf questions how the Western world would react to the mass self-starvation of their sons, suggesting there would be "an emergency response" including "crisis task forces . . . the best experts money can hire, a flurry of editorials, blame and counterblame, bulletins, warnings, symptoms, updates;" (Wolf 180). Wolf goes on to lament the lack of action taken by the media and healthcare providers to prevent eating disorders among young women. (181). "hmmm . . . action./ look around. just/ look around." (Legris 443).

The empty space around the words in this stanza will not be fully shown here for purposes of space; needless to say there is nothing around these words because nothing is really being done to prevent the onset of eating disorders. As "The Hungry Cookie Tin" also shows, there are certainly plenty of images readily available in pop culture of dangerously thin, weak-looking women displayed more like objects than human beings.

The theme of the dehumanization of women takes on multiple forms in both works, and displays the inner turmoil of coping women, while also commenting on larger patriarchal discourses in pop culture as well as in the research community. Dehumanization can come in the form of objectification, Orientalism, dissection and death. The demeaning of women to a sub-human level in pop culture or in academic circles, is both a creator and a product of a sexist culture. This type of environment not only encourages oppression and violence against women, but also makes it difficult for women to develop effective coping methods to deal with the types of trauma many will undoubtedly face.

"hungergraphs" objectifies the woman in the poem by literally describing her in terms of objects. She describes her ribs as pencils, over which is pulled "every inch of flesh taut/

as a drum." (Legris 442). Legris indicates a cultural connection here because the word "taut" is pronounced identically to the word "taught." Not only is she hollow and stretched and abused like a drum, she has been taught to take on that role by her culture.

A similar idea is expressed by Sandra Bartky when she states that the disciplinary practices of modern patriarchy construct the female body to be "a practiced and subjected body, that is, a body on which an inferior status has been placed." (Bartkey 109). The woman's body is further objectified when it is described in terms of a factory. Her body is a sweatshop, toiling out of habit to keep her alive. She feels it buzzing with the effort. Like the refrigerator, which may contain nothing if she keeps it as empty of food as she does her own body, she feels hollow. Her body doesn't make sense to her; it is made up of a "tangle of wiring" which is "crackling" beneath her thin skin (Legris 442). She counts time by the headlights of cars passing by, but also by the way her body processes fuel. She calls the digestion process "discordant movement" and separates that idea from the digestive organs of her body.

Legris takes this objectification of the woman's body one step further when she describes her arms in terms of a surface on which to cut designs. She calls her arms "skinny birch limbs" and wants to carve them into "blunt potato cuts," which is striking since both birch bark and potato skins are peeled. The woman later comments: "my gums are peeling from my teeth." (Legris 443). This overlapping peeling imagery creates the feeling that one must peel away all the layers to know what is really going on inside this woman's life.

At the same time, the woman in "hungergraphs" is disembodied, cut up and remains stuck in a living death. This woman fits in with the majority of women who "are acculturated to internalize an observer's perspective as a primary view of their physical selves." (Piran 373). In this view, the first line of the poem, "I heard once of a woman so thin . . ." (Legris 442) could be a reference to the woman herself, observing her body from the outsider's perspective.

The poem itself is cut up into three progressively longer sections, resembling the cut up views, body and mind of the woman. Even her language seems starved, as she is forced to combine three separate wishes into a run on sentence. The second stanza on the last page reads quickly as a jumble of words, "it's not that i intend to hurt myself i just/ never feel real want to feel so badly/ feel/ anything." (Legris 444). If this stanza were not starved of language, it could read: "i just never feel real. i just want to feel so badly. i just want to feel anything." Instead, the three ideas are forced to combine into one sentence.

Finally the woman's disembodiment leads her to a kind of living death. She uses imagery of bones and blood to shape a disturbing, deathly picture. She stands in front of the mirror "bone-naked" (Legris 442). As she describes her life in the third stanza, she comments, "it's like living." (442); however, this is not the same as actually living. Her body is numb, but also "tingles with/ insects, live wires." (443).

A body which is numb yet infested with insects is the description of a corpse. The live wires come to resemble worms, keeping the body moving only through their own slithering movements. She feels nothing, yet has dreams about near death. Although the woman makes no clear reference to past trauma, she is in an obvious state of disembodiment.

Disembodiment usually "occurs when the body domain becomes associated with acute experiences of personal and social vulnerability, with negative feelings (such as fear, shame or anger), and with internalized harsh or deprecating attitudes and practices. Disembodiment disrupts one's ability to practice self care . . ." (Piran 373). The woman's ultimate separation of mind from body occurs when she is self-mutilating from the observer's perspective. She questions how far she will have to dig into herself. From outside her body, she makes an observation that her own dead body does not bleed very much.

In a more metaphorical sense, this sections signifies a deep inner search to find meaning and feeling within herself as well as a rejection of her assigned role in the dominant culture. Self-mutilation presents an escape through a release of pain and a desperate, reactionary method of snatching back power from the dictates of society. As Dr. Mary Pipher explains, when a woman self-mutilates, she can be expressing, "'I will hurt myself more than the culture can hurt me.'" (Pipher 158).

The majority of women on "The Hungry Cookie Tin" have been amputated in some form. They no longer exist as whole persons. The women who are the most out of proportion are the female characters who are not really women: Barbie, Wilma Flintstone, and the cartoons.

The dehumanization theme progresses to the point of the mechanization of food and the human body. The picture of the otherworldly hand and hotdog emerging from the two sports cars is eerie in its mechanical nature. Right next door, a woman's digitalized face smiles from a cell phone screen. These pictures present the most objectified form the human body can take in mainstream society. These images are no more than pieces of mechanical objects, in a highly constructed "man-made" form. Although I took all the images from pop culture, I added to their dehumanization by further dissecting the women, and then burying them under other images.

In some cases, I covered up their eyes, mouths or entire heads, all in an attempt to expose their decreased humanity; yet in other cases, there was little I could do to make the image any worse than it was already. I came across a whole series of fashion pictures in which the bones of the models had been drawn overtop of their skin. The leg and half the pelvis of one of these models appears next to drawing of a disturbingly disproportionate cartoon woman. Part of the reason I decided to overlap layers of pictures was to create Legris' effect of overlapping cut up segments to make run on sentences.

While I feel that the dissected pictures of women are also reminiscent of Sylvia Legris' dehumanization process , my deconstruction of these women can be

seen partly as my own personal rejection of the unhealthy body types they represent. These images were primarily removed from various advertisements in popular magazines. The presence of The New Yorker is a reminder that many businesses profit directly or indirectly from women's dissatisfaction with their bodies. As Sandra Bartky comments: "The strategy of much beauty-related advertising is to suggest to women that their bodies are deficient;" (Bartky 110). In many examples, businesses exploit not only female beauty and sexuality, but also project an exotic, otherworldly excitement onto images of women of colour.

The image of the woman barely dressed in a stereotypical oriental-looking bikini is a prime example. This exotic quality is obviously false, and therefore becomes a form of Orientalism in its projection of an imagined reality unto women of diverse backgrounds.

The concept of Orientalism, as discussed in my English 020E class with Dr. James Doelman, relates to the projection of imagined characteristics onto a culture of people. These characteristics do not necessarily exist, but are projected onto the culture to fulfill some dream of Western imagination. Orientalism becomes a form of dehumanization because it imposes an outside view on someone else's reality, without allowing those people to have their own voice to define themselves. This is a very significant concept for both works because it taps in to how each piece comments on, and ultimately rejects, certain culturally biased theories and attitudes about eating disorders.

Legris' first reference to Orientalism comes in the first paragraph with her mention of The Alexandria Quartet. The quartet, written by Lawrence Durrell, is a series of four novels, Justine (1957), Balthazar (1958), Mountolive (1958), and Clea (1960) all set in Alexandria, Egypt in the years before World War II, with the final novel entering into the war. Each novel is written with a different first-person narrator, with the exception of Mountolive which is written in the third person. The story has been called Orientalist, as the reader finds "each volume offering a redefinition and reconstruction of the significance of the same (mis)perceived events." (Gifford). The novel also deals with the idea of multiple profiles, rejecting the idea of a single identity. As Balthazar is quoted saying, "Each Psyche is really an ant-hill of opposing predispositions. Personality as something with fixed attributes is an illusion." (Balthazar qut. in Gifford). This contrasts directly with traditional clinical approaches which attempt to slot every patient into a specific category.

The woman in "hungergraphs" is not simply a freak, she is "some sort of freak" (Legris 443) to be categorized by the medical institution. Worse still, the dominant culture-of-thinness model, widely accepted as being the main factor in the West's high eating disorder rates (Thompson 210), tends to overgeneralize and dictate the rational behind self-harm. Under this model, the guide for Treating Mental Illness says: "For some women, the social cost of even the perception of being overweight (regardless of whether they really are) is too much of a burden to bear." (Nathan et.al. 27). In this analysis, eating disorders become "signs of self-centered vanity" and other forms of oppression are

ignored entirely (Thompson 221). As Sylvia Legris writes, “my father says I do this for attention.” While indicating fracture in the woman’s real family, this can also be taken as a comment on the all-knowing patriarch, who assumes the woman starves herself to gain sexual attention from men. The woman’s feelings of being thin-skinned and shallow are repeated again on the last page of the poem, when the poet comments that “it doesn’t take long/ to hit bone.” (Legris 444). Focusing on the culture-of-thinness model could possibly lead to the promotion of medication as a main form of treatment by trivializing the deeper emotional issues behind eating problems. This is expressed in my work with the image of a drug shining over a woman’s face, with the words of a medical professional over top of the woman’s mouth. In these cases, the research community is using their own theories to define the struggles of self-harming women.

Becky Thompson challenged these theories by privileging the voices of women who had experience with eating problems. Although Dr. Mary Pipher uses a great deal of her own analysis, she also privileges the voices of her patients. This movement of listening to the experiences of patients has led to a method called the “patient-centered “approach” which focuses on a holistic approach to healing mind and body and “which offers alternative coping strategies when self-starvation and bingeing/purging behaviors are taken away.” (Berg et.al. 95). Another problem with eating disorder studies has been the reliance on “privileged women who mainly reside in Western countries” and “reliance on prevalent Western values.” (Piran 372). This makes Sylvia Legris’ reference to The Alexandria Quartet even more significant because she may be commenting on the existence of self-harm among women in oppressive cultures world wide, and challenging the notion of eating disorders being a problem of the West. I was able to capture this notion, mostly by coincidence, as I was forced to use pictures of white women almost exclusively for “The Hungry Cookie Tin,” only because of the very low representation of women of colour in mainstream media. Similarly, women belonging to minority groups are also overlooked in the healthcare system due to a combination of outright racism and for some, lack of economic privilege. Studies have shown that doctors are less likely to order tests or prescribe medication for women of colour, even if they are known to be at a higher risk for certain illness because of ethnicity. (Cool 248). This discrimination appears to be just as prevalent in the mental healthcare system, where Becky Thompson found very little research had been done on the presence of eating disorders among women who faced other oppressions in addition to sexism (Thompson 205).

Although “The Hungry Cookie Tin” reflects many of the ideas expressed in “hungergraphs,” it differs in its rejection of cultural harm and method of dealing with trauma. Upon opening the cookie tin, the viewer becomes part of the art work. After examining images of incredible thinness, the viewer is challenged to “SHARE” an oatmeal raisin cookie. The viewer must then examine her own ways of thinking about food. The coping mechanism advocated is written on the cookie. Sharing traumatic experiences with a friend, family member or counselor can be an effective method of coping by helping to diffuse the desire to harm one’s self. In removing the

cookie, however, you have also completed “The Hungry Cookie Tin’s” mission to purge itself of the food. It is left hollow and metallic – reminiscent of Sylvia Legris’ empty refrigerator or drum.

“The Hungry Cookie Tin,” while focusing more on the expression of the patriarchal culture and less on the inner turmoil of coping women, is still an effective reflection of the main themes conveyed in Sylvia Legris’ “hungergraphs.” The two key elements these works examine include contrasting views and contradiction, and the demeaning of women through many forms of dehumanization. The works reflect a knowledge of the inner world of a woman struggling with self-abuse, as well as the larger issues existing in both popular culture and the mental health community. Both works are valuable in their attempt to expand ideas in these areas and to raise awareness about these concerns.

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