

CORPOREAL MAPPING AND SUBJUGATION IN FIPPS' STARFISH: A BIOPOLITICAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes corporeal mapping and subjugation in the middle-grade verse novel, *Starfish* (2021), by Lisa Fipps, and looks at this work biopolitically. This goal is to track fat's governance, pathologisation, and symbolic erasure by overlapping familial, medical and institutional regimes of power and to identify the counter-conducts with which the protagonist restores corporeal sovereignty. The theoretical framework is a combination of the theories of Michel Foucault on biopolitics and disciplinary power, Achille Mbembe on necropolitics and Roxane Gay on the unruly body. This study uses research philosophy interpretivist and qualitative research method of close textual analysis. Data collection takes place through purposive documentary analysis and the analysis of 1 primary literary text (*Starfish*, 294 pages), 1 theoretical memoir (Gay's *Hunger*) and 28 peer-reviewed secondary sources (2003–2025; total purposive sample of 30 texts selected on criteria of theoretical relevance and currency). Data analysis is done by using a method called Biopolitical Textual Analysis (BTA) which combines three approaches, namely Foucauldian Discourse Analysis, Necropolitical Reading, and Corporeal Mapping Analysis. The findings show how the home, the clinic and the school are interlocking panoptic devices which reduce Ellie's body to a pathological deficit. Resistance is not a breaking, but a piling up of micro-conducts: poetic expression, spatial assertion, linguistic reclamation, and solidarity, all leading to the protagonist's assertion of embodied sovereignty, through the posture of the starfish.

Keywords: Biopolitics, Necropolitics, Corporeal Mapping, Fat Adolescent Body, Disciplinary Power, Docile Bodies, Technologies of the Self, Unruly Body, Verse Novel, Corporeal Sovereignty

INTRODUCTION

The human body is not a biological object, but a political topography imprinted by society with its laws, fears, and gradings. In modern literary criticism the corporeal has become a battleground in which the biopolitical regimes of normalization, surveillance, and subjugation stand in concert to discipline, regulate, and, at times, efface non-conforming bodies. Lisa Fipps's verse novel

Starfish (2021) follows Ellie, a young adolescent, as she confronts this struggle in the context of her own life and personal experiences as a fat body. This paper will conduct a qualitative interpretive textual analysis of the *Starfish* drawing from Foucault's concept of biopolitics, Mbembe's concept of necropolitics, and Gay's concept of the

unruly body (Foucault, 1978; Mbembe, 2003; Gay, 2017).

The notion of "biopolitics" as elaborated by Foucault (1995) helps to uncover a dynamic of the present power, which does not act directly but rather in the form of disciplinary management of bodies, making subjects docile through normalisation and self-monitoring. Foucault's Panopticon is a compelling metaphor to describe how Ellie is subject to control from her mother, her fellow schoolmates and even the medical profession, converting her domestic and social environments into spaces of constant surveillance (Foucault, 1995). Mbembe (2003) extends this by adding the concept of necropolitics (the sovereign authority to expose populations to social death) and explains how Ellie isn't simply disciplined but rather symbolically killed through language, exclusion and institutional violence. Throughout the novel, Ellie's body experiences the same kind of transgressiveness, unruliness, and need to be corrected that is seen in the fat body throughout Gay's (2017) memoir *Hunger*. These theoretical lenses are combined together to form the biopolitical framework which enables this research to read and decode the text.

The novel begins with a set of rules for self-governance that Ellie recognizes as "Fat Girl Rules." Such internalised prescriptions, which require invisibility, silence and spatial 'self-erasure', work exactly like Foucault (1995) has described a disciplinary apparatus, a machine that disciplines the body in advance of an external judge. The domestic sphere where Ellie lives becomes the main arena for the exercise of biopolitical control – her mother taking on the role of the normalizing gaze. Ellie's body is not being cared for, it is being audited through food inventories, cabinet audits, and the refusal to provide her with basic clothing as means to correct a body deficit (Fipps, 2021). This is also backed up by Bordo's (1993) explanation of how Western society's preoccupation with body discipline translates cultural concepts of femininity into the ways in which we manage female appetites and bodies.

Mbembe's necropolitical logic is most clearly demonstrated through the dehumanizing language used towards Ellie. "big ol' fat thing" is a

way of describing a character on television who is fat, which is a way of describing a person as a mere object, without feelings, rights, or dignity, a description that Mbembe (2003) characterizes as a way of describing a "death-world" in which social existence is rendered negligible. The idea of "cruel optimism" (Berlant 2011) also helps explain Ellie's hyperactive pursuit of a normative ideal that is normatively impossible. The medical establishment exacerbates this necropolitical logic by turning Ellie into a body part—Foucault's 'clinical gaze' (1978) is directed at the bariatric surgeon's consultation, where Ellie is treated as a stomach, not as a whole person. For Mbembe (2003), this acceptance of the possibility of being fat and undergoing a potentially life-threatening surgery to become thin is a sovereign calculation that the fat-body is a death-world that needs to be destroyed to produce acceptable life.

However *Starfish* is also a story of resistance and what Foucault (1988) calls "technologies of the self", practices in which subjects re-construct their subjectivity. Ellie's therapeutic engagement and the way she 'starfishes' in the pool, extends her limbs to the greatest extent possible in order to counter the spatial politics of exclusion, are both examples of counter-conducts, as is her poetry. The reclaiming of the whale metaphor and the burning of the Fat Girl Rules is a gradual building up of corporeal sovereignty (Fipps, 2021) and her fight with bullies in the school hallway. These acts of resistance recall Butler's (1993) argument that corporeal materiality is created through reiterative performative acts or processes, and that non-normative bodies can challenge the inscriptions of hegemony by performative re-signification. Likewise, Gay (2017) has theorised the unruly body as one which can re-affirm its own geography and this conceptualisation of the unruly body informs the trajectory of Ellie's self-determination. The politics of space is embedded in the spaces that Ellie occupies. The school becomes a panopticon where the general bodies act as the judge that enforces the normalizing judgement, and the broken desk becomes a theatre of spectacular corporeal punishment (Foucault, 1995). The swimming pool, by contrast, is a Foucauldian heterotopia, or counter-site, where

the social laws are suspended and Ellie for a moment becomes sovereign over her body (Wang et al., 2025). The water references in the novel are therefore theoretic in two ways: they are a metaphor of corporeal freedom as well as an invitation to the reader to explore the challenge of maintaining freedom in the threatening biopolitical environment of dry land. As Kamariah et al. (2020) also note, the body is a place of negotiation of power dynamics in literature and fiction is a platform through which the body can be used to expose disciplinary violence.

This biopolitical subjugation is made manifest in Ellie's "fatdar", an acute "sixth sense" for the detection of fatphobic dangers. This internalized Panopticon is a process of disciplinary power becoming redundant after it has been successfully introduced (Foucault, 1995). At the same time Ellie is a prisoner and a guard, a fragmented object whose very thinking is normalised by the normalising gaze. This is exactly what Hollander and Einwohner (2004) find in their discussion of resistance - that subjects under sustained surveillance develop complex internal monitoring systems as strategies for survival. What Gay (2017) calls corporeal exhaustion, the depletion that comes with ceaseless negotiation with a hostile somatic landscape, is the psychological toll of this constant self-policing?

The theoretical framework of this study is based on an integrated biopolitical approach as developed by Foucault (1978; 1995), Mbembe (2003) and Gay (2017). Utilises a method of interpretation, employing qualitative, interpretive approach that centres on close textual analysis of language, imagery, spatial politics and relations between characters as markers of biopolitical governance. The research builds upon a growing field of scholarship in fat studies, critical body theory, and young adult literature, and shows that middle-grade verse fiction can be a complex site of biopolitical critique. Both Mohammed and Vafa (2025) and Johansson (2020) attend to the potential for marginalised literary representations to theorise resistance, and Jenkins et al. (2023) further develop the concept of necropolitics to the context of institutional care, which highlights the medical aspects of Ellie's trajectory.

Research Questions

1. How does the Starfish perform biopolitical and necropolitical mapping of the fat adolescent body across the familial, institutional and cultural subjugation?
2. How does Starfish produce mechanisms of social control and symbolic erasure, and build counter-narratives of corporeal autonomy to the discourse of the 'normative embodiment'?

Research Objectives

1. To analytically explore Starfish with the theoretical framework of biopolitics and necropolitics, tracing the interplay of corporeality and disciplinary power, of symbolic extermination and the fat adolescent female body as they are made to suffer.
2. To explore and interrogate the way the adolescent body in Starfish is at once a site of power, discipline and exclusion and a space where subversive acts of self-representation and corporeal reclamation are possible, contributing to academic discourses about body politics and identity formation.

Overall, the present introduction provides a theoretical and thematic grounding for a critical analysis of Starfish, from which an in-depth biopolitical interpretation can be developed. The novel's depiction of familial surveillance, medical pathologisation, peer marginalisation and the eventual corporeal reappropriation of its protagonist makes it an intriguing literary object through which to theorise the biopolitical management of non-normative bodies. The following chapters will chart the process of corporeal subjugation and the rise of embodied resistance in Fipps' transformative text (Amir & Barak-Bianco, 2019; Haskaj, 2018; Gentles-Peart, 2020; O'Donnell, 2022; Costa, 2021), while drawing on the seminal works of Foucault (1978; 1995), Mbembe (2003), Gay (2017), Berlant (2011), Butler (1993) and others.

Literature Review

The body as a site of contestation has been a critical focus of multiple fields of study since feminist theory and cultural studies have started to pay attention to it, as well as biopolitical

philosophy and trauma scholarship. Entered into this conversation is Lisa Fipps' *Starfish* (2021), a formally inventive and thematically rich verse novel, which dramatizes the biopolitical governance of the fat adolescent female body. This Literature Review examines the seminal and current literature for the three theoretical strands that underpin the investigation: biopolitics and necropolitics, body as a field of cultural inscription, resistance as a corporeal and discursive practice. The review brings together insights from Foucault's (1978; 1995) work, Mbembe's (2003) analysis and research, Gay's (2017) and other overlapping academic discussions to create a scholarly context for the current examination of corporeal mapping and subjugation in *Starfish*.

In this section, theoretical framework is examined by looking at Foucault, Mbembe and Biopower. The theoretical framework which is the basis of this study is taken from the work of Michel Foucault who introduced the concept of biopolitics to indicate that the modern state does not merely seek sovereignty over death, but the productive governance of life on the level of the body and the population (Foucault 1978). In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault (1995) describes the functioning of the mechanisms by which the disciplinary institutions (school, clinic, family) produce docile bodies: subjects who are so thoroughly harassed by normative surveillance that they come to police themselves. In the context of Ellie's own experience with *Starfish*, these rules of the fat girl are an internalized form of punishment, forcing self-erasure. Finally, Ellie's own attempts at resistance, in the form of poetry, therapy and reclaiming space, can be understood, in a certain sense, as subversion of her subjectivity against the disciplinary apparatus, as described by Foucault (1988).

Theorizing sovereign power as the ability to decide who can live and who must be left to death, either social or biological, Achille Mbembe (2003) extends and radicalizes Foucauldian biopolitics with the term necropolitics. Necropolitical orders lead to the existence of death-worlds, spaces of perpetual precarity in which the existence of some populations is made irrelevant. The genealogies of

biopolitical power put forth by Foucault and Agamben share a common point: the subject who has been deprived of political life and left as a mere biological living body, bare life (Costa, 2021). The concept of dehumanization is directly tied to Ellie's dehumanization; her mother has linguistically reduced a fat body into a 'thing' and has enacted precisely that dehumanization. A connection between necropower and disciplinary power is often visible in O'Donnell (2022), creating racially "marginalised" and "social" subjects, such as Ellie, who live at the boundary between social life and social death. Jenkins et al. (2023) also expand upon this to show that institutions could be considered as necropolitical devices that enforce normative ideas of the body over the dignity and wellbeing of those who are nonconforming.

A second line of scholarship relevant to the present work is the body as a surface on which cultural norms, ideologies and power relations are inscribed. Judith Butler (1993) lays out the basic premise of her book *Bodies That Matter*: corporeal materiality is not pre-discursive but is produced through iteration of performative acts, and bodies that do not fit into hegemonic norms are made abject and socially unintelligible. In Butler's words, Ellie's fat body is a body not recognised as part of a normal economy (of the school, of the family, of the clinic). This analysis is further developed by Susan Bordo (1993) in her book *Unbearable Weight*, in which she shows how the Western fascination with a slender body translates into a strict ideology of self-control and female virtue in the regulation of appetite and body size. The mother's addiction to being obsessed with Ellie's eating is vivid representation of the tyranny of the cultural ideal, Bordo explains, "a process of continual correction of the female body. Based on the theory that power is performed on the body through literary texts, Kamariah et al. (2020) claim that the female characters in literary works play a role in being caught in systems of monitoring and correction that produce dominant gender ideologies.

Hunger is a theoretical resource and a comparative autobiographical text for Roxane Gay's memoir (2017), which serves the dual purpose of this

study. Gay theorises the “unruly body” as one that surpasses the spatial and aesthetic parameters of normative acceptability and is subject to surveillance, correction and exclusion. Her story of living and being fat in public places - facing hostile architecture, unavailable clothing, and strangers' entitled looks - offers a theoretical framework to understand Ellie's experience of being corporeally inconvenienced and socially marginalized. Gentles-Pearl (2020) also explores how Black Caribbean women challenge the decolonizing of their fat bodies, challenging white beauty standards, and asserts corporeal subjugation is experienced along multiple axes, including race, gender, and size. In addition, Johansson (2020) provides a historical background of fat liberation activism, which can be seen as a radical critique of the neoliberal body positivity movement that tends to coopt and depoliticize the radical critique offered by fat, Black, and non-normative bodies.

Corporeal inscription, studied in the literature, is an additional aspect of the medicalization of the fat body. Amir and Barak-Bianco (2019) explore food as a biopolitical tool of control and show how nutritional governance is an extension of a state's power into the most personal aspects of body. Haskaj (2018) examines how the Foucauldian notion of biopower is replaced by the neoliberal concept of necroeconomies, where bodies that are not able to perform productive citizenship are considered economically and socially disposable. In Starfish, this logic becomes visible in the context of the bariatric surgery consultation, where the doctor's gaze negates Ellie as a person in favor of a plastic model of a stomach, that is, a separation of the person from their diseased organ as Foucault (1978) described it. Wang et al. (2025) amplify this discussion to the present context of digital health, and suggest that smart wearables and biometric data collection systems reimagine and enact disciplinary surveillance and neoliberal logic of optimizing the body, mirroring the corporeal audits that Ellie experiences.

A third strand of scholarship is on resistance as a corporeal and discursive practice. Borrowing from the sociological categorisations of Hollander and Einwohner (2004), resistance can be seen as a

continuum from invisible self-erasure to conspicuous spatial assertion, which describes Ellie's gradual transformation from one extreme to the other. The concept of cruel optimism as put forward by Berlant (2011), which is also instructive, is that subjects are trapped by hurtful attachments to normative ideals of thinness, social belonging and maternal love because to give them up would be to have to face the structural impossibility of achieving them. Ellie's progressive distancing from the thinness-that-is-acceptance is a painful but necessary severance from cruel optimism, in Berlant's sense.

In "The Feminist Reclamation of Mythic Monstrosity: Medusa as a Model of Insurgent Agency", Mohammed and Vafa (2025) criticize the recuperation of the mythic monstrosity, especially Medusa, as the prototype of insurgent agency, and assert that the reclamation of demonized bodies can be considered as a discursive insurgency against patriarchal biopolitics. On this plane goes Ellie's recovery of the whale metaphor, displacing its use as a weapon of dehumanisation and re-imagining it as beautiful and majestic. Quade (2024) also points to the feminist dystopian narrative as a continual contestation of heteronomous power, which in Ellie's journey from docile subject to corporeal sovereign, results in a transformative subjectivity. Marathe (2019) confirms this with a Foucauldian analysis of resistance in South Asian literary fiction, which shows that the permeability of power itself allows for emergence of 'counter-conducts' through alliances.

In the last few decades, a large body of research on body politics in young adult and middle-grade fiction has emerged, and critics have shown that such genres are anything but outside the realm of serious cultural criticism. As demonstrated by Parsons (2016), a contemporary form of adolescent fat protagonist is used to question corporeal logics that are socially constructed, thus revealing the epistemic violence of what is seen as the norm in the body culture. Similarly, Lear (2015) looks at feminist dystopian works as sites where female characters challenge identity scripts outlined by institutional framings that rely on surveillance, offering a pathway for an agonistic

struggle for recognition that is strongly echoed in Ellie's journey in *Starfish*. In a timely and insightful comparative reading of embodied faith and female agency in YA fiction from minority cultural contexts, Chaoui (2023) confirms the genre's ability to theorize the relationship of identity, body, and institutional power.

In this context, it is worth mentioning that Chen (2023) uses a Foucauldian—and discourse theory—perspective to examine dystopian fiction, which is directly transferable to the analysis of *Starfish*, as it encodes and contests the normalizing regimes of biopolitical modernity. In relation to feminist contexts, Bianca's (2021) work explores the political implications of corporeal monitoring, both imposed by others and done by self, and how these practices either reinforce or challenge biopolitical modes of government under different circumstances. This analysis adds to the reading of Ellie's fatdar as a survival strategy and a sign of successful biopolitical colonization. Doh et al. (2025) take this worry into the digital arena, exploring the algorithmic beauty filters that, like analogue forms of surveillance, produce new corporeal normalisations for the body of the young.

Combined, the above scholarship provides a solid theoretical and critical background for the current research. Many works have already theorized biopolitical governance (Foucault, 1978, 1995), the cultural inscription of the body (Butler, 1993; Bordo, 1993; Gay, 2017), the disposability of the body in the context of neo economics (Haskaj, 2018; Costa, 2021), and resistance as embodied counter-conduct (Hollander & Einwohner, 2004; Mohammed & Vafa, 2025). Relatively few studies, however, use these concepts specifically for verse fiction, and fewer still deal with the fat adolescent body as a site of biopolitical and necropolitical governance in children's literature. *Starfish* is therefore an important and under-studied literary landmark of biopolitical critique. This study aims to fill this void, by tracing corporeal mapping and subjugation in the domestic, medical, institutional, and linguistic registers of Fipps's text, showing how young adult literature can theorize structural violence and how it is an essential space

for the cultural critique and narrative resistance of structural violence.

Methodology

The study is based on the interpretivism research philosophy where meaning is not inherently in the world, but is rather socially and discursively constructed using language, power and cultural practice (Creswell, 2014). For the study of literature that is interested in the embodied, lived aspects of resistance and subjugation, interpretivism is an approach that is especially appropriate, since it emphasizes the research role of the active interpreter of meaning over the passive recorder of fixed facts. For this study, the interpretive approach allows for a complex reading of the political and emotional space of Lisa Fipps' *Starfish* (2021), acknowledging how biopolitical governance is inscribed into language, space, relations between characters and narrative form. This philosophical stance shares Foucault's own genealogical approach, where power is not seen in grand statements but in the smallest layering of discourse or institutional practice.

The method of study used in this study is a qualitative research method with principal method of close textual analysis. When the research goal is to interpret, understand, discover the ideology of the phenomenon and trace the production of subjectivity through discourse, rather than quantify or generalize across populations, and when the data is in the form of text, language, or non-numeric information, that is the time to use qualitative methodology (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The technique of reading can be used to attend to the selection of words, metaphor, imagery, narrative voice, and form as signifiers of biopolitical governance and corporeal resistance. The systematic interpretive reading of the entire text of *Starfish* focuses on scenes of surveillance, medical intervention, linguistic dehumanization, exclusion in space and acts of counter-conduct. This approach is in keeping with the literary biopolitical criticism done by Foucault (1995), Mbembe (2003), and Gay (2017).

In this study, the data collection is carried out using purposive documentary analysis, which is conducted and used exclusively primary and

secondary textual data. Primary data source: *Starfish* by Lisa Fipps, 2021, Nancy Paulsen Books, 294 pages of 1 primary literary text, presented in verse form. Secondary data sources are 1 theoretical reference text, *Hunger: A Memoir of (My) Body* (2017) by Roxane Gay, as a methodological and theoretical lens, and 28 peer-reviewed scholarly texts from journals and academic monographs in literary theory, critical body studies, biopolitics, feminist theory and young adult literature studies. No data collection using participants is used, all textual data are collected from library databases, academic repositories and published editions.

In textual and literary research, the term "population" is not used for the people involved in the research, but it is used to refer to all the texts and theoretical materials that are relevant to the research area. The notional population for this study includes all the published literary work, critical essays, and theoretical monographs on the themes of: 1) biopolitics and necropolitics in literary contexts (c. 200+ scholarly works), 2) fat studies and critical corporeality (c. 150+ academic texts), 3) young adult and middle-grade verse fiction on body politics (c. 50+ novels and critical readings of them), and 4) the theoretical works of Foucault, Mbembe, Butler, Bordo, Berlant, and Gay, as a group, the 12 foundational monographs. Combined, the total notional population of texts (of the same category) is about 400+ texts in these four categories.

The sampling technique used is purposive (criterion sampling) as the usual sampling in qualitative literary research, which is used by researcher to select the items of source that are theoretically relevant and useful in analyzing the research rather than random representativeness (Patton, 2002). The sample consists of: 1 primary literary text (*Starfish* by Lisa Fipps, 2021); 1 autobiographical theoretical text (*Hunger* by Roxane Gay, 2017); 6 foundational theoretical monographs (Foucault, 1978; 1988; 1995; Mbembe, 2003; Butler, 1993; Berlant, 2011); and 22 peer-reviewed journal articles and book chapters (selected based on explicit engagement with biopolitics, necropolitics or critical fat studies; published from 2003 to 2025 for

theoretical currency; and direct applicability to corporeal surveillance, corporeal resistance, or corporeal representation in young adult literature). The final sampled corpus has a total of 30 texts, giving a "theoretically dense" and "analytically focused" evidence base.

The data analysis is carried out with Biopolitical Textual Analysis (BTA) that is an integrated critical approach to the analysis by combining three analytical lenses, namely: (i) Foucauldian Discourse Analysis, which views literary language as a place of production of power/knowledge, examining the discourses and the disciplinary mechanisms that are embedded in the dialogue, narration and institutional representation of the text; (ii) Necropolitical Reading, in line with Mbembe (2003) who read the act of dehumanization, medical pathologization and social exclusion through the lens of the death-world embedded in the text; and (iii) Corporeal Mapping Analysis, which is based on the concept of the unruly body by Gay (2017) to examine the spatial politics, the metaphor of the body in space and the structure of narration in relation to the biopolitical inscription of the fat body. The textual evidence has been arranged thematically, according to four analytical categories: (1) domestic biopolitical surveillance; (2) medical pathologization and the clinical gaze; (3) peer-enforced spatial exclusion; and (4) technologies of corporeal resistance. They are each read through the integrated theoretical framework to make a layered interpretive reading of corporeal subjugation and agency in the novel.

Data Analysis

4.1 Introduction

Starfish (2021) is a verse novel for middle grade readers by Lisa Fipps, a sustained biopolitical critique and a coming of age story. Fipps creates a literary laboratory with the first-person voice of an eleven-year-old fat girl whose life is being lived by a world that doesn't like her. The material of the novel is analysed in a systematic and theoretically informed way in four main analytical fields: (1) the domestic as a space of biopolitical discipline, (2) the medical as an apparatus of necropolitical normalization, (3) panoptic exclusion in the space

of the school and public space, and (4) the development of technologies of the self and corporeal counter-mapping. Foucauldian biopolitics (Foucault, 1978; 1995), Mbembe's necropolitics (2003), and Gay's corporeal theory (2017) are all integrated in the reading of the language, imagery, spatial metaphors, and narrative structure of the text as indices of biopolitical governance and embodied resistance. The verse form of the novel itself is analytically significant. The individual brevity of these poems is a unit of experience: a moment of watching watched and feeling watched; a moment of pretending to be watched and being watched; a moment of pretending to be watched and being witnessed. The white space around each verse, formally, represents the isolation and erasure of Ellie in the social world. Gay (2017) theorises that the fat body lives in a world shaped by the two largely unfavourable terms of its existence: inconvenience and invisibility, and Fipps's form reflects this, fragmenting Ellie's interiority into parts which have to be read in sequence to achieve a fuller grasp of the entire architecture of her subjugation. The following analysis considers them as 'biopolitical speech acts' (in which disciplinary power speaks through bodies, language, and space) and as 'counter-conducts' (in which Ellie starts to write her own corporeal map).

4.2 The Domestic Sphere as a Site of Biopolitical Discipline

4.2.1 The Fat Girl Rules: The Internalized Penal Code

Even if the novel doesn't begin with a scene of violence, it does begin with a legislative act: the articulation of the Fat Girl Rules. Before the story opens, Ellie has internalized these rules: make yourself small, do not make waves, do not take up space, do not be seen or heard – a codified constitution of self erasure that she has mastered. According to Foucault (1995), discipline is made perfect not when the external guard is looking at the prisoner, but when the prisoner looks at herself, examining the guard in the mirror and seeing himself looking at her. The Fat Girl Rules are just this type of success—Ellie has become her own panopticon, monitoring her own activity, her eating habits, her voice, and her space, all in

readiness for a strict normative regime to punish her. “What these unwritten rules are you discover when you break them, and you have to deal with the consequences” (Fipps, 2021, p. 15). The hurtiness of this comment reflects that the rules are not social conventions that are harmless, but are punitive scripts which are enforced via shame, humiliation and social exclusion.

Shrimpage is a rule that organizes Ellie's physical life. Gay (2017) posits that this is what “sapient contraction” refers to: the fat subject's forced diminishment of her spatial, audible and social presence to just enough to live in a threatening space. As Ellie is taught from repeated punishments, she doesn't choose to contract but does so because it is a way of survival. In the originary moment of this biopolitical inscription, Ellie's happy cannonball causes the “tsunami of shame” from her family and spectators that is depicted in the birthday pool episode (Fipps, 2021, pp. 12–13). As from here on, exuberance is itself transgressive: her body's natural desire to move, to sound, to flow through space, is inscribed as social threat. The verse novel by Fipps is sure to enact such a system of power relations onto the body, situating the female protagonist in the sphere of surveillance and correction—such as literary texts do in the work of Kamariah et al., who affirm that literary texts enact power relations onto the body, positioning the female characters as caught in systems of surveillance and correction, in which the reader is a witness to the moment of biopolitical inscription.

4.2.2 The Mother as Biopolitical Proxy: Surveillance, Audit, and the Body as Ledger

In an article, Foucault (1978) describes the family as one of the key institutions of the biopolitical government through monitoring and controlling the health, eating and movement of the self at the level of the individual body. In *Starfish*, this institutional function is represented with stunning accuracy by Ellie's mother: her domestic practices are a regime of corporeal auditing, and the home itself is a panoptical surveillance state. The mother's actions of searching through garbage for food wrappers, checking the cupboards, tracking calories are not shown as failing from the norm of

maternal action—its actions are normal, the local manifestation of a larger biopolitical apparatus that pathologizes the fat body, and its task of fixing it is delegated to the family. Here, as Ellie tells it, Mom is combing through the trash, searching for evidence that I cheated on my new diet... and she counts out the food” (Fipps, 2021, p. 64). The language of “evidence” and “cheating” is juridical, placing Ellie in a position of being a suspect in her own home, her eating as acts of crime, as domestic prosecution.

The Western culture of the self-control of women has imbued ideologies into the regulation of their appetite so that the inability to control the body is a failure of the moral, aesthetic and social self (Bordo, 1993). The mother's refusal to buy Ellie new clothes as she has “gained more weight this summer” is an economic sanction that comes to the materialisation of this ideology (Fipps, 2021, p. 32). The mother forces Ellie to wear clothes that do not fit properly, which makes her body's failure clearly visible to the social world, and further stigmatizes Ellie's body as a corrective device. Berlant (2011) describes this as cruel optimism: Ellie's desire for the love of her mother and family is tied to the very conditions of her subjugation. The mother's control is not felt as hatred, but rather as care, and that is what makes it as powerful as a biopolitical tool.

The mother's dehumanizing discourse lies at the extreme end of this home management, as revealed by Mbembe's (2003) necropolitical framework. Her death by linguistic murder happens when she calls a fat television character a “big ol' fat thing” (Fipps, 2021, p. 80), which undermines Ellie's personhood at the base. The word “thing” takes the agency, interiority and humanity out of the subject, leaving a person as a mere thing, a thing that takes up space but that has no value. The reassignment of some bodies from the register of bios (political, biographical life) to zoe (mere biological life) is the necropolitical move par excellence. Ellie's response is an act of corporeal self-mapping—a radical graphic image of her own internal battering, a rendering of the psychic violence she experienced as a result of linguistic dehumanization (Fipps, 2021, p. 79). The bodily wound is not just a physical wound but

a wound that is felt within, as Gay (2017) suggests, a wound that has an affective and psychological dimension.

4.2.3 Food as Biopolitical Text: Secret Eating and Micro-Rebellion

Food in the home economy of *Starfish* is never just food for nutrition. It serves as a biopolitical text, a medium that marks and challenges power, shame, punishment and resistance in tandem. In the fat subject's psychological wounding, and the social system of shame, food appears to be the site in which the two converge most intimately—feeling hungry is feeling guilty, feeling watched is feeling shame, and feeling shamed is feeling judged (Gay, 2017). The food which Ellie hides from her mother's auditing eye is what Foucault (1995) would call a counter-conduct—what he refers to as a ‘micro-rebellion’ that establishes a ‘residual sovereignty’ over the body's need, despite the overall surveillance of the house. Ellie's furtive eating is not a flaw in her character, it's a political survival tactic: the only way for her to satisfy her body's needs without invoking the surveillance system.

The Thanksgiving dinner tableau encapsulates the biopolitical aspects of food with something of a knife-wielding precision. Throughout the meal, while the rest of the family are eating potatoes, Ellie is provided with mashed cauliflower, which is offered as a form of “dietetic care” but is a public stigmatisation (Fipps, 2021, p. 173–175). The dining table becomes a courtroom, and Ellie's body becomes the charge, evidence, and verdict in the trial that is her brother Liam's comment: Sorry we all have to suffer because you are fat” (Fipps, 2021, p. 175). The family meal is disrupted by the logic of biopolitics and the ritual assertion of kinship and unconditional belonging becomes a disciplinary hearing. In fact, Amir and Barak-Bianco (2019) show how this is exactly what happens with food as a biopolitical tool of control, with the regulation of what a body can eat, how much and in what circumstances it is seen as a key instrument of institutional and familial governance of deviant embodiment.

4.3 The Medical Apparatus: Pathologization, the Clinical Gaze, and Necropolitical Surgery

4.3.1 The Fix-Her-Up Mentality: Ellie as a Broken Project

Foucault's (1978) term for the clinical gaze refers to the medical institution's practice of separating the medical subject from his or her diagnostic object, the patient, by reducing them to a set of symptoms and pathologies. In *Starfish*, this clinical gaze is enacted systemically, cruelly by Ellie's experience of the medical system. Her mother's reference to Ellie as her "fix-her-up project" (Fipps, 2021, p. 211) encapsulates the neoliberal biopolitical discourse of the fat body, where it is not a body that is respected, but one that is broken and needs fixing, optimizing, or perhaps "writing off." This framing is echoed by the succession of dietitians, doctors, specialists to whom Ellie is referred, and each encounter reiterates the logic that Ellie's body is a deficit, something that must be fixed, not a body that needs to be cared for. In the modern health system, the discipline of surveillance often gets reinscribed in the language of wellbeing and optimization—structural violence becomes a therapeutic opportunity for individuals, notes Wang et al. (2025).

The "fix-her-up" mindset plays out on several levels of the novel's domestic and medical settings. The mother's repeated efforts to find medical solutions despite Ellie's very clear unhappiness, her refusal to respect Ellie's autonomy and wishes, and her decision to defy Ellie's body in order to make it healthy, all mirror Haskaj (2018)'s description of the necroeconomic logic of bodies that do not conform to their productive norms. As a fat body, Ellie's existence is a burden, an asset that becomes less valuable to the family's economy, and therefore needs to be rectified regardless of the expense, even in the child's health and well-being.

4.3.2 The Bariatric Surgery Consultation: Necropolitics and the Scalpel

The bariatric surgery consultation is the most concentrated place in which necropolitical violence occurs in the novel. The scene is organized to emphasize a dehumanizing of Ellie, a

human being, who is literally put on the surgeon's desk next to a plastic model of stomach and bowel, and who is only addressed as an organ, not a patient or a child, in his explanation of surgical intervention (Fipps, 2021, p. 212). This is the most reductive form of the clinical gaze, as Foucault (1978) has explained: the patient is metonymically reduced to his or her pathologized anatomy, his or her subjectivity is reduced to his or her diagnostic condition. Now, Ellie isn't just a little girl with feelings, preferences and a life anymore, she is a gut that needs to be altered surgically.

It is no accident that the necropolitical aspects of this scene are clearly evident. Necropolitical power, in Mbembe's view (2003), is one that is enacted by the sovereign who argues that some lives are less valuable than the normatives he or she does not represent. The willingness to subject a child to bariatric surgery – a procedure that has been shown to have serious risks of life-threatening complications and death – is this calculation: the "fat body's deviation from thinness" is considered a greater risk to life than the procedure that is proposed to correct it – which has been demonstrated by the near-fatal bariatric surgery experience of Ellie's Aunt Zoey (Fipps, 2021, p. 131). The blindness of the mother's words – "just trying to fix you" (Fipps, 2021, p. 213) – to the discursive process that renders necropolitical violence a mode of care: the scalpel is presented as a means of salvation; its capacity to kill is made secondary to its capacity to normalize, and so on.

This is one of the most important moments of counter-conduct in the novel, and Ellie's reply to it is. She takes off the plastic stomach off the desk, grabs a pair of scissors and yells, "Do you want to make me—skinnnnnnny?" (Fipps, 2021, p. 214). This act is a disruption of the clinical gaze, that which is passive, to the patient-object, insisting that her body is not a broken organ, that needs to be surgically remade, but is a body to be heard. Her scissors in her hand are not weapons but a symbol of her resistance to being cut to size. Jenkins et al. (2023) note that institutional care settings are regularly 'necropolitical' corporations that focus on ideals of the norm, thereby eradicating the dignity of subjects who do not conform to those

ideals; Ellie refuses to be devoured by the apparatus.

4.3.3 The Therapeutic Counter-Space: Dr. Wood and Technologies of the Self

The novel is a counter-space to the necropolitical medicine system in the form of the therapeutic relationship with Dr. Wood, an ethical space for self-formation. The bariatric surgeon speaks to Ellie through a plastic organ, but Dr. Wood speaks to her as a subject – as a person with an interior life, a history of trauma, and the ability to define herself. Technology of the self, according to Foucault (1988), is a set of practices that people use to manipulate their own subjectivity. Dr. Wood's therapeutic interventions are just such technologies; in his role play, he takes on the role of Ellie while Ellie plays her bully Marissa, allowing Ellie to notice that the bullying is indeed a script of the outside world, rather than a truth of the inside world (Fipps, 2021, p. 188).

This deconstructive therapeutic practice of 'Fat Girl Rules' is a kind of epistemic liberation. Upon the words of Ellie, Dr. Wood says, "I am fat." Ellie is forced to face her own non-normativity, which is the cause of the cruel treatment she receives from people (Fipps, 2021, p. 191). The first step in what Gay (2017) calls the reclamation of visibility is a recognition of this logic as imposed; it is a script written by power and not a truth revealed by her body. In Foucauldian language, the therapist's office turns into a heterotopia of healing, a place where the corporeal map created by family, school and clinic is being challenged.

4.4 School and Public Space: Panopticism, Spatial Violence, and Social Death

4.4.1 The School as Panopticon: Peer Enforcement of Corporeal Norms

In *Starfish*, the school environment becomes a Foucauldian panopticon, where the power of discipline is diffused throughout the peer group and turns each corridor, classroom and cafeteria into a space of 'normalizing' surveillance. The power of the panoptic structure has not so much been in the exercise of the look, as in the creation of a permanent state of visibility, where the subject induces the look in himself (Foucault 1995). The

result of this constant visibility is the psychological product of Ellie's fatdar, her "sixth sense" for fatphobic attitudes (Fipps, 2021, p. 21). Fatdar is set to work much like Spider-Man's Spidey-sense, allowing her to pre-read environments for threat, meaning that she can "read" rooms for the "fear and hatred vibe" that would indicate an impending disciplinary situation of violence. It is not just a quirk of an individual's personality, but a means of survival in a totally unfriendly social environment.

Marissa and the peer group are the school's agents of normalization—the informal enforcement of the Fat Girl Rules in the institutional space. In their social policing, they play on Ellie's nickname, Splash, a renaming of her original misdeed (the birthday cannonball) to serve as a constant reminder of her deviance. As Foucault (1995) notes, naming is a power/knowledge act: one names a thing and names it as a member of a taxonomy of a discipline. Ellie is forever stuck in the category of excess: the body that cannot be contained, cannot be contained within its "proper boundaries," that bursts its limits and violates the "normal flow" of social life, as the name Splash suggests. All use of this nickname is an act of reinscribing the biopolitical judgment that her body is a social problem.

4.4.2 The Broken Desk Episode: Material Exclusion and Spectacular Punishment

The broken desk scene is the novel's most vivid instance of biopolitical spacial violence. The first thing that springs to mind when the desk collapses under Ellie is the social reaction which is not the concern for her wellbeing, but rather a chorus of mockery: "Splash broke a chair!" (Fipps, 2021, p. 133). Instead of a structural failure of the furniture (as it was designed for a normative body, and Ellie is not), it is the failure of Ellie's body which has failed the furniture. This reframing is a classic biopolitical operation, in which the violence of normative environments is projected onto the non-normative body that exposes it. The laughter of the classroom is not just a form of social cruelty, and the laughter of the classroom is a kind of discipline, it is the enforcement of space which belongs to bodies of a certain size.

This scene speaks to the more profound stakes of Mbembe (2003) "necropolitics. What is being used against Ellie is social humiliation, and social humiliation is meant to shame her, but also, in a way to execute her socially: make her unfit for the educational space, make her body a mark of disruption and disgrace to be expelled by the social body. It is the next escalation, the taunt that Ellie receives of "Thar she blows!" (referring to Moby Dick's white whale), that pushes her into the realm of the necropolitical and the socially dead (Fipps, 2021, p. 127). Necropower and disciplinary power entangle and produce marginalized subjects, who hover between living and dying, social and disciplinary, as O'Donnell (2022) shows, and Ellie is located just on this borderline.

4.4.3 Heterotopias of Relief: The Swimming Pool and the Library

In *Starfish*, the school's topographies are antagonistic, identifying two counter-topographies: heterotopias, places that are outside the regular social order that, instead, have other laws governing them. The most developed consistently is swimming pool. The water represents Ellie's weightlessness, limitlessness, and temporary freedom from the social judgment of others (Fipps, 2021, p. 11). The pool's water removes the laws of gravity from her life, and, most importantly, the Fat Girl Rules that apply to her on land. In this place, she learns the art of starfish living: arms and legs spread wide, and claiming all the space you are given, which you are denied on dry land. The seemingly simple, physically pleasurable act is a radical political statement, a counter-mapping of the sovereignty of the body written on water.

The second heterotopian space is the library although this is not as secure as sanctuary. It offers Ellie a place of escape from the necropolitical social order of the cafeteria, in which she is effectively prey, and a place where she starts to formulate her poetic practice, as well as her sense of narrative agency (Fipps, 2021, p. 43). It is there that Ellie starts her biggest act of collective resistance, the "trash can" bulletin board project, where she and her friend "Enemy Number 3" (who is bullied because he is poor) encourage the

students in the school to stop the hurtful words they are receiving. This changes resistance from an individual struggle to an epistemic struggle. Hollander and Einwohner (2004) state that a successful resistance demands collective visibility, which the bulletin board project offers, in an institutional space that has long been the arena of subjugation.

4.4.4 The Public Sphere and Linguistic Necropolitics: The Bus Scene

The bus episode brings the politics of exclusion that characterises the institutional space of the school into the wider public sphere and thus shows that Ellie's biopolitical subjugation can not be restricted to specific spaces and is structural and pervasive. Throughout the book, Ellie experiences an assault of linguistic necropolitics on the DART bus, as teenagers tell her they would prefer to die if she looked like that and an older woman pinches her arm and calls her "chubby," as if her body were public property for comment and contact without restraint (Fipps, 2021, p. 94). I'm not the only one to theorize this phenomenon, however. Gay suggests that this is the "invasive and entitled gaze", the social contract that assumes the fat body is a show and anyone can view it. This scene is a public dehumanisation of Ellie's body, a necropolitical judgement that the 'fat' body's life is not worth living, its presence is not worthy of respect.

The location of the bus is also important. When Ellie tries to avoid the harassment, she barrels through the bus like a "pinball," and her body crashes into other people as she passes through the public space (Fipps, 2021, p. 95). The fat body glides through public space while the normative body stumbles along, finding difficult places to sit, hostile crowds, and that the built environments don't fit them. The novel's spatial logic is echoed in Ellie escaping into the rain and being rescued by Catalina: the only safe spaces are those forged through allyship and solidarity, temporary heterotopias found in an overarching hostile environment.

4.5 Technologies of the Self: Resistance, Counter-Mapping, and Corporeal Sovereignty

4.5.1 Starfishing: Spatial Counter-Mapping and the Politics of Presence

The starfish is the novel's main image of "corporeal resistance," and the transformation of this practice from the swimming pool to the school hallway is the path of Ellie's political change. Disciplinary power is exercised through the exact control of space and movement, Foucault (1995) notes, bodies are placed, organized, and regulated according to the normative demands of the situation. The Fat Girl Rules are a direct statement of the spatial discipline that Ellie is expected to abide by: to be small, to not take up space, to not exist in public space. The opposite of starfish is to be absolutely in tune with this spatial ordinance. In the school hallway, Ellie refuses to be pushed against the wall to let "Enemy Number 3" pass through her, forcing him to go around her, enacting a micro-revolution in the spatial politics of the school (p. 128). Her body isn't something that can be taken away, it's something that must be dealt with. She breaks the normal etiquette of the hallways; she claims that she has the same right to be in the middle of the hallway as any other normatively sized person, because she is there anyway. This type of spatial claim I call the claim of the unruly body: the demand that the world must include the body—it is how the body is, not how the body fits the world, Gay (2017). Mohammed and Vafa (2025) describe this as a discursive insurrection, the corporeal enacting of a counter-narrative that challenges the dehumanization classification that has been written on it.

4.5.2 The Reclamation of Language: Whale, Thing, and the Discourse of Dignity

Language is the medium par excellence used to register biopolitical power on the body, which is why the recuperation of language is one of the main areas of corporeal resistance in *Starfish*. As Ellie engages with the Whaling Wall mural in downtown Dallas, her epithet, "whale", undergoes a profound discursive inversion as it becomes a means of humanity, monstrosity, excess, and suitable hunting, as it is used by the bullies to

dehumanize her (Fipps, 2021, p. 255). Ellie's mind and politics change as she gazes at the great whales painted on the wall: "They're big. They're amazing. They're beautiful" (Fipps, 2021, p. 255). In Ellie's reinvestment of the word with beauty, power and grandeur, instead of monstrosity, Foucault (1988) would call her a discursive counter-practice—a symbolic economy that is rewritten.

In the same way, Ellie's answer to her mother's use of the word 'thing'—her confrontational performance of 'Behold the Thing!', which turns the dehumanizing term back on her mother as a mirror of her own evil—is an act of parrhesia, fearless speech that reveals the violence hidden in the normalizing discourse (Foucault, 2001). When Ellie does the deed that her mother has described as monstrous, she makes her mother experience the dehumanizing effects of her own words. The mother's breakdown – her acceptance that "thing is a horrible word" indicates that the panoptic tower has been cracked; the inmate's gaze has returned to the warden (Fipps, 2021, p. 244). Ultimately, as Quade (2024) notes, feminist dystopian resistance must rely on the subjects becoming legible as agents, not objects of power; Ellie does just this in her performance.

4.5.3 Poetry and Writing as Corporeal Articulation

The technology of the self is most extended and theoretically substantial in Ellie's poetic practice. Foucault (1988) suggests that writing is one of the major technologies by which subjects come to be human subjects, to develop a 'care of the self' that defies the disciplinary classifications of power. Poems are not just a way for Ellie to express herself creatively—they're also a way to express her experience in her own voice, to make sense of the "tsunami" of emotions that she's been instructed to ignore by the Fat Girl Rules, to shape narrative out of these feelings, to make herself a subject with an interior life beyond the pathological box that the Fat Girl Rules expect to fit her in.

This novel's most compelling example of this writerly counter-conduct is the letter to the stranger at Niagara Falls (Fipps, 2021, p. 126). A stranger takes a picture of Ellie at the Falls without

her permission, which reproduces the entitled gaze Gay (2017) points to as a key feature of fat body politics, but Ellie is not 'convinced' by this non-consensual surveillance. Rather, she sends him a letter in which she questions him, demanding that he tell her what would be the thing he wishes not to be known of him; and she shows his lack of virtue. The power/knowledge gaze is turned upside down: the viewer of the photograph is the one being photographed and the subject of the text is the person who wrote the investigative text. This epistemic reversal is the most extreme form of counter-conduct, as Foucault (1995) would call it, the disciplined subject taking control of the instruments of the disciplinary machine to re-interpret its conditions.

4.5.4 Burning the Rules: Epistemic Purification and Symbolic Liberation

The novel's most clear-cut gesture toward liberation through destruction is the burning of the Fat Girl Rules in the chiminea, which is a physical manifestation of the epistemic purification to which Ellie's resistance has been directing herself (Fipps, 2021, p. 206). The rejection of official history, as established by power, is a major form of resistance, according to Foucault (1995). The destruction of the constitution of her own subjugation is what Ellie does, literally burning away the rule of her own body, leaving the freedom to invent a new one, writing it for herself. The fire is not destructive but generative, it clears the ground for the construction of a self which no longer is organized by the imperative of erasure.

This physical destruction is similar to the communal epistemic act of the trash can bulletin board in the library where Ellie asks the school community to put away the hurtful words weaponized against the most vulnerable in our midst. Ellie undertakes a biopolitical reclassification, which categorizes the bullies' language as "garbage" to be thrown away, not "truth" to be internalized. As Foucault (1978) claims, biopower relies on the naturalization of its truths: fat is bad, it is unhealthy, it is a moral failing are statements that must be made to be objective facts and not ideology. These "truths" are

denaturalized by Ellie's noting of their trashiness, and their disciplinary authority is taken from them as they reveal the ideological machinery which produces them.

4.5.5 Solidarity and the Alliance of the Marginalized

Most politically sophisticated insight that the novel has to offer is that resistance to biopolitical subjugation cannot be effected in isolation; it needs to be accompanied by the development of solidarity across registers of marginalisation. Ellie's collaboration with "Enemy Number 3," a boy orphaned by his own poverty, shows that the politics of exclusion is a multi-axis process of difference exclusion and that counter-hegemonic solidarity can be found at the nexus of these axes (Fipps, 2021, p. 162). The bulletin board project, co-developed by Ellie and her unlikely ally, is one way to provide this visibility in an institutional space that has been the chief arena in which they have been marginalized. The bulletin board project is one way to provide this visibility in an institutional space that has been the main arena of their marginalization.

The connection with Catalina is that through her, the novel's most sustained consideration of a "biopolitical ally" – one who does not look the body down with the normalizing gaze, who creates space for an unregulated existence, who dismantles the conditions of shame and concealment. The insistence that Ellie join her in the pool, wear a bikini and be in the visual field, without apology is a set of counter-conducts, working together to dismantle the architecture of erasure (Fipps, 2021, p. 146). Ungoverned witnessing is necessary to a healing from biopolitical subjugation, as Gay (2017) describes it, a counter-space in which an alternative self-image can become more firmly established, as witnessing is not the same thing as weaponization. The alternative self-image is material, the Chrismukkah mirror, which is framed in colorful tiles and given as a gift, is the material that gazes on itself and finds beauty, instead of pathology (Fipps, 2021, p. 202).

4.5.6 The Cake Episode: Counter-Archive and the Reclamation of the Narrative

The climactic scene involving the whale-shaped cake in which the bullies try to force Ellie into humiliating herself in front of the camera assembles all the novel's big biopolitical themes into one spectacular scene of counter-conduct. The bullies' scheme is a necropolitical one: they force Ellie to eat the whale cake on the screen, and they hope to create an archive of her "monstrosity," of her being too much, that can be used forever as evidence of her humiliation and her social death. The archive is Foucault's (1995) idea of a power mechanism that governs the content of what can be said and seen; and the bullies are trying to create an archive in which Ellie is firmly categorized as grotesque.

When Ellie refuses (and then smashes the cake into the bully's face), she disrupts this project of archival completion at its moment of completion. She says: "I won't eat it/I don't like it, and I don't want you guys to be bullies again" (Fipps, 2021, p. 270). Returning the weapon to the aggressor is a corporeal counter-map—a refusal of the passive consumer of abuse and a statement of Ellie's agency, rather than passive body. This counter-conduct is filmed in Catalina's archives, which are truly a visual record of Ellie's power, not her shame. The resistance that Costa (2021) defines as biopolitical is not only a refusal of subjugation, but the creation of alternative regimes of visibility; in the case of Costa, it is exactly this alternative regime of visibility that is created by Ellie and Catalina's counter-archive.

4.6 Synthesis: Corporeal Mapping, Biopolitical Sovereignty, and the Aesthetics of Existence

The path taken through the above analytical points makes for a clear enough biopolitical arc: the total subjugation to the emergence of corporeal sovereignty. The path from victim to victor is not a simple one, but one in which the internalization and disruption, submission and counter-conduct, erosion and reconstitution are all recursive. At the beginning of the novel, her subjectivity is so over-written by a biopolitics of inscription that the Fat Girl Rules rule her, the

gaze of the mother audits her consumption, the spatial politics of the school erases her, and the medical establishment pathologises her existence. In the novel's final moments, she has not managed to break free from the biopolitical order of the world, but she has found a set of practices, alliances, and discursive resources, which allows her to navigate it on her own terms.

Foucault (1988) talks about an "aesthetics of existence" that is a way of life in which the subject arranges her existence according to her own values, as opposed to the requirements of the institutions. When Ellie arrives at this condition, she declares, "I starfish... It is a big world to host all and every one of us" (Fipps, 2021, p. 291) in the very last image of stargazing with Viv and Catalina in the pool. It is not a simple rejection of the biopolitical regime in which she has lived, rather it is a counter-biopolitical contract that is establishing a different vision of space, place, and body value, one that challenges the scarcity logic of normalizing power that precludes her from inclusion.

Gay (2017) is convinced that reclaiming space by the fat body is a personal action of self-acceptance, but also a political act of resistance against the norm of the economy of visibility and value. As Ellie states there's space in the world for her body, for the world to embrace her rather than her embracing it, she's challenging the fundamental assumptions of biopolitical governance with a principle of corporeal democracy. As per Johansson (2020), such fat liberation discourses are a real threat to the neoliberal body politics, and they make an attempt to reclaim the fat body as a place of dignity instead of deficit. In this way, Starfish exemplifies what Gay (2017) calls "the highest form of corporeal articulation": the metamorphosis of the private experience of bodily shame into a public declaration of the right to exist, fully and unapologetically, in the space the world has created to exclude.

The ending of the novel, with the starfish metaphor, is also a formal resolution to the theoretical tension between biopolitical subjugation and embodied agency. The starfish exists in space, extends its arms by nature, not against the space, but by the form. Catching this

metaphor for herself, Ellie denies the disciplinary call for her to be contractible, and instead claims that her natural expansive selfhood isn't a thing to be fixed but a form of life to be lived. The last and most radical counter-map in the novel is one that is not a map of the hostile space Ellie has traversed, but one of the sovereign space she has taken—a space where the only rule is the right to occupy the place she needs to thrive. The ending of cruel optimism, as Berlant (2011) might put it, would be the departure from the damaging orthotics of thinness, acceptance-through-compliance, and belonging in the norm, for the more austere yet true freedom of self-authored existence: Ellie has left behind the very damaging attachments of thinness, acceptance-through-compliance, and belonging in the norm, and has found the more austere yet true freedom of self-authored existence.

Findings

In *Starfish*, the fat adolescent body isn't just a biological reality; it's a politically shaped space that is constantly mapped, surveilled, and subjugated by intersecting regimes of power. From the first page of the novel, Ellie's body becomes the arena where the norms and judgments of her family, institutions and culture are inscribed. The *Fat Girl Rules* are not Ellie's own; they are a code of discipline that has been imposed from outside and reinforced by constant punishment. What emerges here makes no mistake on Ellie's part: she does not seek out smallness, she is forced into it by a social order that sees her body as an act of transgression and has an outcome of systematic correction.

One of the main conclusions of the present research is that the home, as a space of safety and unconditional love, exists as the main laboratory of biopolitical discipline in *Starfish*. This is a relationship of food auditing, calorie counting, and the mother's refusal to buy suitable outfits for her body: the body is a deficit account that needs to be continuously corrected. The language used by the mother – most poignantly her use of the term “thing” for a fat person – dehumanizes Ellie and allows for her cruel treatment. So what they found is that the maternal care is not the opposite of biopolitical violence in this novel; it is

dangerously intermingled, and the language of health and love softens the blow of systematic psychological violence as it happens.

The medical apparatus is discovered to work as a necropolitical machine, which determines the fat body as a disorder to be eliminated rather than the person who needs care. This discovery is confirmed in the bariatric surgery consultation: that is why Ellie is addressed by a plastic organ model instead of a child, and why she is willing to be put at risk for surgery and subjected to the sovereign calculation that thinness is better than life. It is not “neutral space of healing” but rather an agent of “reproduction” and “amplification” of overpowering biopolitical logic of the family and the school, and this is supplemented by the power of science.

But the most important thing this study has uncovered is that resistance within *Starfish* is not an individual dramatic act of liberation, it is a series of micro-conducts: secret eating, poetic expression, spatial assertion, discursive reclamation, therapeutic engagement, and communal solidarity. The acts are small in themselves, but their totality represents a radical shift in Ellie's own body, in the social sphere, and in her sense of selfhood. The starfish posture, arms and legs outstretched to seize as much space as possible, is the image of this sovereignty by accretion, by every day, by the body, that the novel is dominated by: a posture of claiming the right to exist without hesitation, to be there, to be present, to be fully, in a world that tries to minimize her.

Conclusion

In this study, it has been shown that Lisa Fipps's *Starfish* is much more than a book about bullying or body image. It is an ongoing and developed biopolitical work that charts and describes, in a very precise manner, the processes by which the modern disciplinary society disciplines, pathologies and symbolically obliterates the non-normative body. The novel exposes the intersecting regimes of family, medical and school culture as a political subjugation of the fat adolescent body, one that renders it docile, silenced and ultimately disposable even as these cultures offer to provide care, health and social

order by enforcing their violence. This, therefore, is not an Ellie story, but a political one, and Starfish insists it is.

The Foucault's biopolitics, Mbembe's necropolitics, and Gay's corporeal theory have been found to be quite fruitful for the understanding of the textual evidence of the novel. Foucault's ideas of the Panopticon, docile bodies and technologies of the self shed light on the ways in which Ellie is subjugated and then slowly freed. The desublimization of this subjugation, its most extreme forms – the dehumanizing language, the surgical proposal, the social death of peer exclusion – is what Mbembe's necropolitics explains but which would lay beyond the scope of Foucauldian discipline. Gay's theoretical voice is autobiographical; it gives the theory living, embodied qualities, bridging abstract concepts of biopolitics with the intimate reality of living in a fat body in a hostile world. These forms combine to show that Starfish is a text that not only is a vehicle for personal psychology, but also for structural critique.

One of the most important findings of this study is that corporeal mapping, in which power writes its judgments into the body, organises its movement, space and meaning, can be a process of subjugation but can also be a process of liberation. Ellie draws the gutted fish with the word 'THING' written in blood, which is a corporeal map of her trauma, as if it were political violence rather than her personal fault. When she starfishes in the pool and then again, in the hallway, she is creating counter-maps – maps of presence not maps of erasure. The novel's most profound message is that the same act of mapping that subjugates can when subjugated by the subject herself become an act of sovereignty, the study concludes.

The study suggests that Ellie's liberation occurs not through weight loss, social acceptance or the fixing of her body, but through three mutually reinforcing practices: language, art, and solidarity. Poems, a letter to the stranger in Niagara Falls, and confronting her mother with the word "thing" are all acts of language that appropriate the language used against her and use it for her own purposes. Her work—her fish drawing, her starfish drawings,

her bulletin board with a trash can—"makes the private pain public," making her pain political, not personal. Her solidarities with Catalina, Enemy Number 3, and her father— her ability to break the biopolitical order's most potent weapon: isolation – reveals that true human connection can challenge the order of the biopolitical.

This research has three major contributions to previous research. First, it shows that the site of middle-grade verse fiction is a theoretically serious, analytically productive one for biopolitical critique, worthy of scholarly attention as is literary fiction for adults. Second, it brings necropolitics beyond the traditional fields of war, colonialism and racial violence, to shed light on the social death that takes place, at all times and in all places, in relation to the corporeality of fat bodies. Thirdly, it makes Gay's Hunger not only a memoir, but a viable critical model for literary study, and puts bodily experience, particularly the experience of the disordered and impolite body, at the center of theory. All these contributions support a more radical, more corporeal and more politically engaged definition of the study of body politics in the modern literary text.

It is not a simple victory statement about her own accomplishment that is Ellie's last word but a political assertion of radical democratic possibility. It says that the world doesn't tolerate her body, doesn't fit her size, doesn't fit her form, is not a natural fact, but a political one, and that another world is possible, a world where she is not unknown, but known, a world where she is not erased, but present, a world where she is not subjugated, but sovereign. Starfish is not a comforting or simplistic book, and the biopolitical regime which has ruled Ellie's life is not an easy one to melt away at the end of the novel. What it offers, instead, is an image of an ephemeral girl who is learning to read the maps drawn upon her body, to challenge their authority, to start – gingerly, imperfectly, courageously – to draw her own.

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