



Culinary Capital: The Intersection of Food and Neoliberal Governance in Asako Yuzuki's novel *Butter*

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ABSTRACT

This article examines Asako Yuzuki's novel *Butter* through the frameworks of biopolitics and neoliberalism, focusing on the main characters, Rika and Kaji. The analysis demonstrates that neoliberalism extends beyond economic considerations, significantly influencing societal norms surrounding diet and body image. Rika embodies the internalisation of these neoliberal demands, grappling with her identity amid societal pressures for self-optimisation. In contrast, Kaji serves as a figure of resistance, questioning the normalisation of body management as a moral imperative. The dynamic between these characters highlights the intricacies of individual agency within the constraints imposed by structural inequalities. *Butter* critiques the biopolitical imperatives that women face, underscoring the tension between the pursuit of pleasure and bodily autonomy in a competitive environment. By employing theories of biopolitics and neoliberal governance, the novel prompts readers to reflect on the pervasive forces that shape their lives and self-perception.

Keywords: Biopolitics, Neoliberalism, Governance, Resistance, Self-optimisation

Literature Review

Existing scholarship and criticism on Asako Yuzuki's *Butter* have focused almost entirely on questions of body image, food and gender. Reviewers and critics have read the novel primarily as a feminist critique of Japan's beauty standards, highlighting the double standard by which cooking is praised as a leisurely hobby for men but treated as an unpaid duty for women. Manako Kajii's character sketch is typically read as a figure of bodily transgression. Critics note that the public is fixated on her body rather than her

crimes, revealing a broader stratification of women along a spectrum of aesthetic types for male consumption.

This body of commentary treats the body itself as a symbol within a cultural discourse of beauty and femininity. What this existing commentary has not examined is how these bodily standards function as a mechanism of power in the first place, and that it stops at the level of representation rather than asking what kind of governing logic produces gender expectations.



This paper turns to Foucault's essay titled *Security, Territory and Population* (1977-1978) and *The Birth of Biopolitics* (1978-1979) as its analytical lens. *Security, Territory and Population* apply the concept of governmentality to portray power that operates not through direct command but by shaping the field of choices available to a subject, along with the related concept of counter-conduct, which describes resistance that redirects a power structure's logic from within rather than rejecting it outright. *The Birth of Biopolitics* extends this framework specifically to neoliberal economic rationality, theorising the modern subject as an entrepreneur of the self who continuously invests in and manages their own body and behaviour as a form of capital.

Foucault's lectures withhold any explicit verdict on neoliberalism, never stating whether this mode of governing is to be resisted or accepted. This paper also relies on Berend van Wijk's article, "Beyond the Entrepreneur Society: Foucault, Neoliberalism and the Critical Attitude" (2021), to interpret that ambiguity productively. Van Wijk argues that Foucault's genealogy does not render any judgement on neoliberalism but cultivates in the subject a critical attitude, which is an ongoing, non-programmatic practice of questioning one's governability.

Reading *Butter* through this lens allows us to move beyond the existing oppression/liberation binary. Kaji's transgression can be read as counter-conduct, a redirection rather than a rejection of the feminine nurturing role she is expected to perform. In comparison, Rika's arc can be read through the critical attitude, a genealogical, non-moralising process of self-questioning that produces only local, limited refusals of her own governess, rather than a wholesome liberation. In this way, the paper extends the existing body of food, gender, and body scholarship on *Butter* into a properly biopolitical register, asking not only what the novel says about

beauty and gender but also how power itself operates through and on the bodies at its centre.

The term "neoliberalism" entered widespread political and economic discourse in the late twentieth century to describe a set of policies that reoriented governments towards deregulation, privatisation and market-driven governance. Over the following decades, however, scholars across political theory, sociology, and cultural criticism began to argue that this narrow economic definition failed to capture the full scope of neoliberalism's effects. David Harvey, in *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, reframed it as a political project that aimed to restore and consolidate elite-class power under the guise of market freedom. Further, Wendy Brown in his work *Undoing the Demos* argues that neoliberalism does not merely deregulate markets, but it installs market rationality as the organising logic of nearly every domain of life, that is reshaping education, family and even democratic citizenship according to the metrics of competition, investment and return.

It is Michel Foucault, however, who gives the analytically precise account of this expanded understanding of neoliberalism, which is not simply an economic policy but a distinctive mode of governing subjects and populations. Foucault's lecture series at the Collège de France 1978-1979, delivered the rationality that would come to organise late-capitalist societies, a mode of power that governs not through direct command, but by shaping the total field of incentives within which individuals calculate their own choices and that reconceives that the self not as a fixed identity but as a form of capital to be continuously invested in and optimised.

Theoretical Framework

This paper utilises two of Foucault's lecture series, *Security, Territory, Population* (1977-1978) and *The Birth of Biopolitics* (1978-1979) to develop its



theoretical framework. Foucault introduces governmentality as a dominant power form that focuses on security and population management, which operates by shaping environments and norms rather than through direct authority. He traces this modern governance back to pastoral care, where the duty to nurture individual lives evolved into the state's responsibility to manage population health and knowledge, ultimately framing human existence as investable capital within the context of neoliberal rationality. Additionally, Berend van Wijk's recent analysis of Foucault's nuanced stance on neoliberalism is examined.

The paper focuses on highlighting the risks of concealing authentic moments of pleasure and resistance, particularly in the characters Rika and Kaji. This perspective suggests that individuals are mere passive subjects who are dominated by neoliberal forces that subvert genuine agency. However, this paper argues that Kaji's transgression constitutes forms of counter-conduct that reflect resistance to societal norms. Similarly, Rika's self-questioning exhibits her active engagement with her own governmentality that allows her personal fulfilment. Acknowledging these nuances enriches the discourse on agency, which shows that even while power structures are prevalent, they also enable individuals to express pleasure and resistance.

This paper employs a close reading of the English translation of *Butter*, abided by governmentality theory to explore the various facets of neoliberalism and biopolitics in the text. The critical analysis primarily works through Polly Barton's translation, which allows an intricate examination of the characters in the novel without direct references to the original Japanese version.

In the novel *Butter*, feeding and culinary care operate on such pastoral technology. We find in the novel these repeated frames of cooking for men as a duty

that organises the societal ecosystem and renders certain feminine behaviours legible as virtuous and necessary. The domestic setting is not merely an apparatus of governmentality, but a site where norms about bodies, appetite, and gender are taught and performed so that women's labour sustains social reproduction.

Counter-Conduct: Kaji's Resistance to Neoliberal Norms

Manako Kaji embodies this pastorate's paradox, where she tends to men through food with intense attention and expertise, yet in the end, her pursuits are ambiguous, uncanny and ultimately destructive as much as nourishing. Foucault states that governmentality operates through institutions and social arrangements that tend to make certain behaviours rational or expected rather than positing them as direct orders. This way of projecting shows the trajectory of how sovereign command has changed to biopolitical management of the population. In society, feminine functions like feeding and caregiving act as micro-technology of governmentality. They regulate roles and social order and all objects of biopolitical concern.

In the lecture, the term counter-conduct is used by Foucault to describe a form of resistance that does not say an absolute no, but resists certain aspects to have autonomy. In the article, "From Counter-Conduct to Critical Attitude: Michel Foucault and the Art of Not Being Governed Quite So Much", Daniele Lorenzini states that counter-conduct is not a simple rebellion but an absolute refusal "to be conducted like that" (9), and it exerts a demand to be conducted differently, by other methods and towards other ends.

In the article, Daniele Lorenzini states that if conduct is a theatrical performance, counter-conduct would not be merely walking off the stage, but rather the refusal to interpret the assigned role as prescribed,



instead interpreting it differently. Kaji, in the novel, performs her role similarly by not rejecting the feminine role of feeding and domestic performance. Still, she refuses the disciplined version of womanhood that the societal script demands of her.

One day, out of the blue, they just became too much. The faces of people who thought nothing of making endless demands, of being constantly given things. The way they sat at the table simply waiting to be served, not lifting a finger...don't get the wrong idea. I like serving men and giving them pleasure. Women who don't deserve the name. But being with just one man, a changeable woman like me gets bored.

(Yuzuki 300)

Butter turns the feminine care into a theatrical performance of counter-conduct, where Kaji inhabits the role that is assigned to women, but at the same time, she is altering the purpose by revealing that domestic nature is a socially scripted form of governmentality rather than a natural feminine truth.

Asako Yuzuki's novel portrays neoliberalism not as an abstract economic backdrop but as a mode through which governmentality is operating on the bodies, appetites and self-understanding of the characters. This can be seen through the protagonist Rika, who embraces and is operated by this ideology. Applying Van Wijk's distinction between counter-conduct and the critical attitude to this novel allows us to analyse the novel beyond the resistance versus oppression framework that dominates much popular commentary on the text.

At the beginning of the novel, Rika embodies the identity of a homo economicus, as Foucault states in

The Birth of Biopolitics. The individual is not simply a worker or consumer but an entrepreneur of the self who is continuously investing in themselves as a business. In her limited time between work and private life, she optimises herself to thrive within a competitive social field. She treats food as biological maintenance rather than pleasure, as she subsists largely on convenience store meals while working long hours in a male-dominated workspace. This is not the result of any explicit rule that has been given to her nor by any single authority figure demanding that she do.

Her slim physique ensured that, despite not being a remarkable beauty, she would still be complimented, and that the fast fashion items she chose haphazardly suited her figure just fine. Rika was in an industry where maintaining one's appearance tended to be rewarded with professional success.

(Yuzuki 9)

This makes the self-denial appear to be simple, but her body functions in this sense as a form of human capital. An asset to be maintained, monitored and protected from depreciation. In the article "Beyond the entrepreneur society: Foucault, neoliberalism and the critical attitude", Van Wijk describes the neoliberal subject as someone who "continuously weighs their options, calculating how to optimally invest scarce resources like skills, time and energy in their well-being" (Wijk 12). Even her relationship with her boyfriend, Makoto, operates within this same calculative logic. Her worth within the relationship becomes measurable in terms of appearance and self-discipline, which echoes the way human capital theory treats not only labour but the entirety of a life as a portfolio of investable, gradable attributes.



This dynamic intensifies once Rika begins gaining weight under Kaji's culinary influence. Her boyfriend's open criticism of her changing body and her colleagues' anxiety that her altered appearance might compromise her professional credibility reveal how thoroughly her physical self has been absorbed into a calculus of investment and return. And this precisely is the mechanism by which, as Van Wijk notes, neoliberal government "shape[s] the environment wherein economic action can take shape" (Wijk 13), that is, managing populations not through direct coercion but through incentive structures that make certain self-presentations more rational, more socially and professionally advantageous, than others.

Notably, no single character in the novel comments on Rika's need to remain thin; rather, the accumulated weight of professional judgment, romantic disapproval, and internalised cultural expectation performs this governing function collectively and diffusely. For Foucault, the security model of power operates on a population rather than the older disciplinary model operating on individual bodies through direct rule.

The novel also stages the moralization of consumption that biopolitical governmentality produces. Rika's growing culinary education, which she uses to select fine ingredients, to distinguish subtle flavours, to prepare elaborate dishes under Kaji's influence, becomes a form of self-investment in a different register. It turns into cultural and experiential capital rather than professional capital. Even her turn toward pleasure and indulgence remains legible within a broader neoliberal habit of self-evaluation through taste, acquisition, and refinement, suggesting that escaping one economy of optimisation, that is, career and maintaining a desirable body type, does not necessarily mean escaping the underlying logic of self-improvement

altogether but only redirecting it toward a new domain.

Meanwhile, the media's fixation on Kaji's body size is treated by the tabloid press and the reading public as more shocking, more damning, than her alleged crimes themselves, that dramatizes what Foucault calls the security model of power operating at the level of population management. It is not a direct prohibition against fatness, but a diffuse, that is, statistically inflected moralization of body size as a matter of individual responsibility and self-management rather than social or economic circumstance.

Rika: The Struggle for Self-Optimisation in a Neoliberal Landscape

Rika's transformation in the novel should not be read as a simple triumphant escape from neoliberal governmentality but as an instance that demands a critical attitude. It can be analysed as a genealogical, non-moralising process of local self-questioning rather than a wholesale rejection of her prior life. She does not abandon her career or her ambitions, but she begins instead to interrogate her specific expectations placed upon her, such as the aesthetic demands of society and her own habit of treating food as mere function. This matches exactly what Foucault describes as the aim of critique that is not opposing governmentality as a totalizing whole, but asking, "how not to be governed like that, by that, in the name of those principles, with such and such an objective in mind and by means of such procedures, not like that, not for that, not by them." (Wijk 9).

Food serves as a primary mechanism for the construction of neoliberal subjectivity, by functioning not merely as a biological necessity but as a central site for the exercise of biopolitical governance and the formation of the entrepreneurial self. So, within this framework of neoliberalism, economic rationality



extends beyond market transactions to permeate all aspects of human life, thereby transforming individuals into enterprises responsible for the continuous optimisation of their own human capital. So, in this context, food consumption and dietary practices have become strategic investments in one's physical and social value, where every meal is subjected to cost-benefit analysis regarding health, aesthetics, and productivity

The role of food in the neoliberal subjectivity is thus characterised by the internalisation of market logic, where the body is managed as a project of self-improvement, and dietary choices are moralised as indicators of personal responsibility and civic virtue. So, the concept of biopolitics as articulated by Michel Foucault's later works provides us with the theoretical foundation for understanding how food regulates populations and individual bodies under neoliberal regimes. Biopolitics refers to the administration of life at the level of the population, focusing on techniques that manage health, hygiene, and longevity to ensure the productivity and stability of the state.

Further, the role of food in this neoliberal subjectivity is reinforced through the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion, where adherence to specific dietary norms determines social belonging. Neoliberal regimes often employ strategies of normalisation that marginalise those who do not conform to the established standards of productivity and health and thus create a hierarchy of desirable and undesirable subjects. In this context, food choices become symbolic acts that signal those who are in alignment with the values of efficiency, discipline and self-control. And those who fail to meet these standards are often subject to public shame and judgement, which further reinforces the pressure to comply with the normative expectations.

The critical attitude towards these neoliberal demands can be understood through the potential for resistance and counter-conduct, where individuals refuse to be

governed in specific ways and assert alternative modes of existence. While neoliberalism seeks to standardise behaviour through the promotion of specific dietary ideals, there are opportunities for individuals to challenge these norms by embracing practices that prioritise pleasure, community, and bodily autonomy over optimisation and efficiency.

However, such resistance is often co-opted by market forces, which commodify alternative lifestyles and reintegrate them into the logic of consumer choice. Thus, the role of food in neoliberal subjectivity remains a contested terrain, where the tensions between individual agency and structural constraints are continuously negotiated through everyday practices of eating and drinking. Food plays a pivotal role in the formation of neoliberal subjectivity by serving as a medium through which biopolitical governance is enacted and the entrepreneurial self is constructed. Through mechanisms of self-responsibility, biopolitical differentiation, and normalisation, dietary practices are transformed into moral imperatives that reinforce existing inequalities and regulate individual behaviour.

Wendy Brown, in her work *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*, argues that under neoliberal reason, "all conduct is economic conduct; all spheres of existence are framed and measured by economic terms and metrics, even when those spheres are not directly monetised." (Brown 9). Brown insists that economisation does not require literal monetary exchange; instead, fields, persons, and practices become economised simply by being evaluated according to metrics of optimisation and competitive value. For Rika, her food-as-fuel existence is never presented as a financial transaction, yet it is thoroughly economised in Brown's sense, governed by calculations of value, appearance, and return rather than pleasure.



Rika's early convenience-store meals and her calculated dietary routine are built on the premise that thinness proves self-worth. It is not an isolated personal habit but an instance of the diet program as a technology of human capital, in which her body becomes an asset whose value must be continuously monitored, appreciated, and protected against depreciation. Brown states that the goal of the neoliberal individual is always present and pervasive, whether they are studying, interning, working, planning for retirement, or reinventing themselves in a new phase of life; this goal is to approach each activity with an entrepreneurial mindset, recognise their own worth, and enhance their evaluation or status. Rika's existence functions precisely according to this principle that is evaluated and assessed by her boyfriend, her peers, and the wider marriage and workplace environments.

Brown observes that a subject constituted as human capital "is at persistent risk of failure, redundancy and abandonment through no doing of its own, regardless of how savvy and responsible it is" (Brown 36) and that this jeopardy "reaches down to minimum needs for food and shelter, insofar as social-security programs of all kinds have been dismantled by neoliberalism" (Brown 36). This plays a crucial role in how the novel addresses Kaji's victims. Their susceptibility to her manipulation is not merely a reflection of individual loneliness, as is often portrayed in popular analyses of the novel, but rather a systemic result of the disassembly that Brown describes: men deprived of the umbrellas of protection previously provided by stable jobs, community ties, or pensions, left with marital or domestic relationships as the only discernible harbour against economic and social instability. Therefore, Kaji's exploitation of these men is not just a matter of preying on vulnerable individuals, but rather taking advantage of a structural gap created by neoliberal economic policies that she misleadingly presents as

the only form of social harbour that the novel implies still holds some cultural validity.

Rather than treating unequal social outcomes as a correctable injustice, Brown argues that under human-capital logic, "inequality, not equality, is the medium and relation of competing capitals" (Brown 37), such that "a democracy composed of human capital features winners and losers, not equal treatment or equal protection" (Brown 37). This reinterpretation of the public's intense reaction to Kaji suggests that what people found most disturbing, more than Kaji's lack of conventional beauty, was her failure to be thin. Instead of viewing it as an unusual display of misogyny external to the societal framework, it is seen as the normal, anticipated functioning of a social structure where individuals deemed losers in terms of body shape are viewed as inherently deserving of disdain. In this context, Kaji's fatness identifies her as a deficient participant in the realm of self-presentation, and the harshness of public criticism is understood not as an overreaction, but as consistent with the system.

Brown's framework also clarifies how we can interpret Rika's transformation. Her increasing enjoyment of cooking under Kaji's influence should not be confused with a complete departure from economisation. While she moves away from the thinness-optimisation economy, her newfound skill in using quality ingredients and techniques has the potential to reinforce a different, albeit less harsh, form of self-cultivation and distinction, which is, after all, Brown's concept of economisation that can operate without being financial. The change lies not in Rika escaping the logic described by Brown, but in her beginning to adopt, in van Wijk's terms, a critical perspective on a specific aspect of her own governed behaviour by rejecting the particular calculation that linked thinness to value, while not discarding the notion of self-cultivation altogether.



Critically analysed through the lens of Foucault's governmentality, van Wijk's critical attitude, and Brown's human capital theory the article allows to read *Butter* not merely as a novel about body image, but as a sustained meditation on how thoroughly economization has restructured food, desire, and intimacy themselves and on how uneven access to critique, security, and social harbour determines who can survive that restructuring and who becomes its casualty.

Conclusion

Asako Yuzuki's *Butter* presents a nuanced exploration of the intersection between neoliberal governance and individual subjectivity, particularly through the characters of Rika and Kaji. This paper draws on the theories of Michel Foucault, Wendy Brown, and Berend van Wijk to examine how biopolitics operates within contemporary society, shaping women's identities and their complex relationships with food and the body.

Utilising Foucault's concepts of governmentality and biopolitics, the study reveals how power operates not through overt control but by shaping the choices available to individuals. Rika's character embodies a critical attitude, in line with Foucault's notion of ongoing self-examination, allowing her to question and navigate the governing logics that define her existence. In contrast, Kaji's actions serve as counter-conduct, illustrating a redirection of the imposed feminine nurturing role while challenging societal norms. This approach transcends traditional binaries of oppression and liberation, emphasising the multifaceted ways individuals negotiate societal expectations.

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Wendy Brown's insights deepen the analysis by framing neoliberalism as a governing logic that extends beyond economic practices to influence personal identity and societal values. Her critique of how neoliberalism converts individuals into entrepreneurial subjects resonates with Rika and Kaji's experiences as they grapple with the pressures of self-optimisation and body management. This connection underscores how neoliberal governance permeates the personal domain, intertwining with broader structural inequalities that shape women's lives.

Furthermore, Berend van Wijk's interpretation of Foucault's ambivalence towards neoliberalism highlights the importance of cultivating a critical stance toward the structures of power that govern our lives. By applying his insights, this analysis reveals the tension that exists between individual agency and systemic constraints, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of how personal choices are influenced by larger governing forces.

Ultimately, *Butter* compels readers to reflect on the pervasive impact of neoliberal ideologies on personal identity and everyday choices concerning food, body image, and social roles. By foregrounding the tensions between autonomy, pleasure, and the demands for self-improvement, Yuzuki's novel encourages a critical examination of the power structures that shape our experiences. This multilayered engagement with Foucault, Brown, and van Wijk invites an ongoing dialogue about the implications of neoliberal governance for individual and collective subjectivity in contemporary culture, urging us to consider how we might navigate these complex intersections in our own lives.



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