

**Eating (dis)Order:**  
*Non-medicalised self-starvation and feminine madness*  
*in three works by Francesca Lia Block*  
*Afra Michael Boissevain*

**Abstract:**

In her novels *Echo* (2001) and *The Hanged Man* (1994), Francesca Lia Block's use of *écriture féminine* enables non-medicalised self-starvation to operate as a site of embodied agency for adolescent girls. The protagonists of both novels are adolescent girls who have experienced trauma within their families, and each girl copes with the stress by restricting her intake of food. This project aims to understand the experience of self-starvation outside of the dominant narratives used to explain Anorexia Nervosa: those of strained mother-daughter relationships, and perfectionistic White girls. I believe that "eating issues" in girls and women are far more prevalent than formal diagnoses indicate. With contemporary medical and theoretical literature claiming that there is an "epidemic" of eating disorders, broadening the understanding of eating issues to include undiagnosed experiences would mean that most girls and women in the Western world experience complex relationships with food and their bodies. The implication of this is that an enormous population of girls and women engage in self-starvation. I am interested to discover what self-starvation *does* for girls. What is its function? What purpose does it serve? How does the meaning of self-starvation change when it is diagnosed as Anorexia Nervosa?

With this project, I will begin a new conversation about self-starvation, one that focuses on the experiences of the people who engage in these behaviours instead of how these behaviours (or symptoms) are understood through a psychiatric lens. In order to do so, I will draw from *écriture féminine* and the work of Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray, to discuss non-medicalised self-starvation as an empowering act. The goal of *écriture féminine* is to create a new discourse, by women, for women, and about women – to express the experiences particular to feminine embodiment in a way that celebrates them. Block does just that, inscribing into text a new script of self-starvation, one that honours the bodies of adolescent girls as their own best source of knowledge. Unengaged with medical diagnostic categories of eating disorders and Anorexia Nervosa, Block's language is unique to the adolescent feminine experience of self-starvation. *Écriture féminine* allows Block to express the embodied experiences of her characters without forcing them to fit within the strictures of masculine language. Rather than conceptualising Laurel's and Echo's self-starvation in medical, traditionally masculine parameters, Block simply writes it as an intentional experience. It is this intention that defines the novels as *écriture féminine*, and gives power to the bodies of adolescent girls as a site of healing, rather than of an illness to be cured.