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Book Review: Gut Feminism

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***Gut Feminism* Elizabeth A. Wilson. Duke University Press, 2015. 230 pages. Notes, References, Index Included.**

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Gut Response

Elizabeth A. Wilson's timely, persuasive, and engaging new book, *Gut Feminism*, begins with an interesting and pertinent meditation on endings. In the opening pages of her "Acknowledgements," Wilson retrospectively charts the genealogy of this project's development, remembering how this book began with an ending: it emerged out of an article (published in *differences* in 2004) that Wilson imagined to be the conclusion of her previous book, *Psychosomatic: Feminism and the Neurological Body* (Duke University Press, 2004). That article, also titled "Gut Feminism," was intended to be the summation of thinking that *Psychosomatic* had begun, especially in its third chapter, "The Brain in the Gut." But, as Wilson observes, this ostensible ending held little in the way of closure. Rather than resolving the concerns of her earlier work, Wilson found that "Gut Feminism" consumed her attention and that its exploration of biology, the gut, antidepressants, and feminist theory were, in fact, the point of origin for her next project. This project arrived in the shape of *Gut Feminism*, a theoretical monograph that is organized around two main subsections—"Feminist Theory" and "Antidepressants"—which each house three main chapters and are framed by an introduction and conclusion. Overall, *Gut Feminism* makes a readable and compelling argument for the intellectual importance of following one's gut.

In the introduction, "Depression, Biology, Aggression," Wilson lays out the book's main arguments and situates them in relation to current scholarship in feminist theory, queer theory, and the neuroscientific humanities. Wilson's book contributes to the work of Feminist Science Studies scholars like Evelyn Fox Keller, Karen Barard, and Evelyn Hammond who rethink the relationship between nature and culture and to the work of neuro-humanities scholars like Marc Solms or Oliver Sachs who reclaim a materialist version of psychoanalysis for their thinking about the nature of subjectivity. As Wilson writes, "I aim to show that biology is much more dynamic than feminists have presumed and much less determinate than many neuro-critics currently suppose. Specifically, this book contests the idea that neurological arguments are always about the central nervous system (the brain, the spinal cord): the neurological is not synonymous with the cerebral. ... My argument is not that the gut *contributes* to minded states, but that the gut is an organ of mind: it ruminates, deliberates, comprehends" (5). In spite of a recent surge in work on feminist science studies and feminist new materialisms within the past decade, Wilson claims that there is still "something about biology that remains troublesome for feminist theory" (3). Taking this site of "trouble" seriously (we might see an interesting idiomatic legacy to Judith Butler's foundational *Gender Trouble* here), Wilson's text takes biological data as its object not in order to either skeptically decry or optimistically champion it, but in order to use its insights to speak back to feminist theory as a field. As Wilson articulates it, "[t]his book is less interested in what feminist theory might be able to say about biology than in what biology might be able to do for—and to—feminist theory.

How do biological data arrest, transform, or tax the theoretical foundations of feminist theory?” (2-3). First and foremost, *Gut Feminism* identifies the significant and paradoxical role that biology has played within feminist theoretical history (as both the antagonist of and the vehicle for political efficacy) and theorizes the way in which biology—especially as realized in the body’s periphery—might constitute an important object lesson for feminist theory.

As this introduction makes clear, though, there is a second objective at stake in Wilson’s analysis: that of the necessity of theorizing aggression within both feminist and queer theory. For Wilson, this attention to aggression is particularly important for feminist theory and politics, which she understands to be overly invested in the appropriation of negativity for the ultimate ends of social repair, restitution, and productivity. “Against this idea that the negative can be made valuable (productive, valorized, connected), *Gut Feminism* makes a case that we need to pay more attention to the destructive and damaging aspects of politics that cannot be repurposed to good ends” (6). *Gut Feminism* thus takes the “twin problematics” of biology and aggression as its focus and shows their overlap in the guttural interactions between depression and psychopharmaceuticals. In sum, Wilson argues that “feminist theory could engage the contemporary landscape more potently if it was able to read biology more closely and tolerate the capacity for harm” (17).

Chapter one, “Underbelly,” explores two tenets of Wilson’s engagement with biology: the first considers how the gut itself is a minded organ (“it ruminates,” she says) while the second establishes how feminist work has historically devalued biological processes (22). These two objectives are not, however, disconnected for Wilson. By offering a reading of Gayle Rubin’s foundational text “Thinking Sex” (1984) that highlights how metaphors of eating, hunger, and diet play into Rubin’s overall agenda for the social realization of “benign sexual variation,” Wilson effectively deconstructs how the gut is already paradoxically at the heart of feminist theory’s tactical disavowal of biology. “Here is my suggestion: feminist theory has presumed a kind of biology—a biology that is largely static and analytically useless—as one way of securing its critical sophistication.... these misreadings and repudiations of biology have the particular effect of making feminism smart.” (30). Using Rubin’s work to establish the “anti-biologism position” that she identifies as endemic to feminist theory, Wilson then draws on Melanie Klein’s theory of phantasy to imagine an approach to biology that allows for an “unruly alliance” between biological data and feminist theory (35). This incorporation of biological psychoanalytic theory is a staple throughout *Gut Feminism* and it productively allows Wilson to disclose the extent to which biology is already central to much psychoanalytic thinking, a fact largely ignored by past feminist uses of psychoanalysis.

In chapter two, “The Biological Unconscious,” Wilson extends her consideration of biology to anatomy (and specifically the gut in bulimia) in an attempt to articulate a conception of the anatomical body that is malleable, heterogeneous, and unpredictable rather than inert and intransigent. To do so, Wilson thinks between Sigmund Freud’s work on the anatomical dimensions of hysteria (a topic Wilson also explored in *Psychosomatic* in the case of Emmy von N.) and Sandor Ferenczi’s own more biological theorization of psychoanalysis. Wilson identifies the importance of “thinking biology dynamically” but suggests that Freud’s accounts (especially of hysteria) do not go far enough. Bringing Ferenczi to bear on the way bulimia discloses a complicated alliance between mind and body—gut and will—Wilson ultimately argues for the importance of refiguring the relationship between the biological and the psychological for feminist theory. “Taking bulimia as its case point, this chapter argues that biological and pharmaceutical data are indispensable to feminism’s conceptual and political efficacy, but that the use of these data

has to be unsettling to feminism and biology alike” (49). In turning to bulimia in connection with Ferenczi’s conception of “bioanalysis,” this second chapter proposes a conception of the gut that has meditative capacities, in which psyche and soma “always already coevolved and coentangled” (67).

After having briefly introduced the significance of anti-depressants for her theorization of a minded gut, Wilson turns to her third chapter, “Bitter Melancholy,” in order to more fully develop the relationship between depression and aggression. Drawing on a large body of feminist and queer theoretical work that has used melancholy and/or depression to explore some aspect of the social and its intercourse with subjectivity (see Chesler 1972, Butler 1997, Eng and Kazanjian 2003, Sanchez-Pardo 2003, Balsam 2007, Cvetkovitch 2012), Wilson interrogates why much of this scholarship has elided the centrality of aggression to any account of depression. “The nature of attacking, sadistic impulses, and the difficulties of how to live (and politick) with them, have not yet received sustained attention in feminist theories of depression (or reparation). ...I want to instigate some curiosity about a depressive hostility that has no ambition, and no other trajectory, except the destruction of the objects that the depressive loves, and to argue that acknowledgement (and perhaps some appreciation) of sadistic destructiveness is a necessary part of any feminist account of melancholic scenes” (71). This chapter tracks through a re-reading of Freud’s influential essay “Mourning and Melancholia” (1917) in order to contest the longstanding truism about depression as a form of aggression directed at the self. Using Mercyism—the “repeated regurgitation, rechewing, and reswallowing of food”—as a case study, Wilson contends that this process (which involves the gut and its attendant functions) might be read as a form of pure negativity, as a manifestation of the death drive that uses food rather than a cotton-reel to attack matrixes of care (79).

The conclusion of this first section, which most explicitly engages with feminist theory, left me with some questions regarding how exactly Wilson defines this field. Given that much of the “feminist theory” that Wilson cites in order to substantiate the persistence of the urge toward social construction and repair can also be understood as queer theory (and this is especially true in the text’s conclusion), I would have been interested to hear more from Wilson on how she understood the potential difference between feminist and queer theoretics, especially when it came to biology or aggression. What is the importance of drawing on figures who sit liminally on the line between these two (in)distinct fields, such as Gayle Rubin, Eve Sedgwick, Judith Butler, Lauren Berlant, Lee Edelman, and Heather Love? In other words, I think *Gut Feminism* would have benefitted from a developed account of what constitutes *feminist theory*, especially insofar as it intersects with queer theory on questions of biology and aggression. The exact terrain of what constitutes feminist theoretical work is far from universal or transparent and I think that some definitional perimeters would help the reader understand the scope of Wilson’s field intervention.

After having established feminist theory’s (and the wider humanities) refusal of biology in the first section of the text, chapter four, “Chemical Transference,” tackles the role of antidepressant medications in the human body itself. This approach intervenes into most past scholarship on pharmacology, which has been oriented toward social or cultural analysis. By charting the way that the human gut metabolizes antidepressants, Wilson focuses not only on the way that drugs affect the body, but also (and more significantly) on the way that the body interactively affects drugs. Through this reversal, Wilson seeks to decenter the unilateral agency typically attributed to psychological drugs as they act on the brain by showing how dependent drugs are on the dynamic participation of the gut and viscera; the whole peripheral body (not just the brain) is active in the consumption and transportation of SSRI’s. Wilson thus purposively shifts

the focus from how drugs act on the brain to how the gut acts in response to drugs (98-99). “Put in familiar conceptual terms, I want to use pharmacokinetic to turn critical attention from the center (brain) to the periphery (gut)” (99). From this, Wilson theorizes an interwoven—and internecine—psycho-soma. Here, a concept of “transference” is key since it allows Wilson to think between the registers of the pharmacological and psychoanalytic. Combining Thomas Odgen’s theory of transference (which he calls “the analytic third”) with Hannah Landecker’s theory of metabolic transference, Wilson intervenes into current theoretical analyses of depression in order to propose a theory of treatment that thinks dynamically about the inseparability of the biochemical and the psychological.

Wilson’s fifth chapter, “The Bastard Placebo,” investigates the often-conflicted role placebo has played in the history of medical treatment for depression. Detailing the way that the prescription of placebos has fallen off since the end of World War II (prior to which they were a common form of medical treatment), Wilson charts how they were reappropriated for control groups in experimental drug trials. Contesting medical progress narratives that read the changing status of placebo as a marker of increased scientific accuracy and ethics, Wilson rather shows how the actual effectiveness of placebo—its recognized ability to reduce and manage symptoms—significantly complicates this narrative. Placebos are no less effective as a form of treatment within drug trials than they were as medical prescriptions in the 1940s. In the same vein as her thinking about hysteria where Freud’s method of symptom palliation was notoriously suggestive, Wilson turns to this pharmaceutical data in order to claim that we might begin to understand pills and interpretations as interactive; “rather than calling for less compromised treatments, it seems important to explore and amplify the adulterated nature of pharmaceuticals. My claim here is that adulteration (what in previous chapters I have discussed under the rubric of transference and amphimixis) is the engine of any treatment” (140). According to Wilson, the effectiveness of biological interventions is inseparable from psychological effects of interpretations.

Wilson’s final chapter, “The Pharmacology of Depression,” makes the deconstructive undercurrents of this text more explicit by using Jacques Derrida’s analysis of the pharmakon to rethink the traditional division between drugs and their (suicidal) side effects. “It is not my argument that SSRIs are wholly benign; nor is it my argument that they cause suicidality. Rather, I want to think of SSRI action as part of a grammatological field in which remedies are always already breached by their capacity to injure... I am interested in how antidepressant politics might change if we knew that there was no safe harbor where SSRIs could simply be calibrated as either beneficial or damaging drugs” (146). Thus, this chapter fruitfully draws together many of the points that emerged in earlier chapters—aggression, negativity, SSRIs, depression—and, in so doing, makes the purchase of the book’s conception of destruction clearer for thinking about feminist theory and politics. In many ways, this chapter (along with the conclusion, which turns to the debates about reparativity in queer theory) bridges the gap between the concerns about feminism and biology that were mobilized within the first half of the text and the concerns about pharmaceuticals that motivated the second half. Additionally, the explicit incorporation of deconstruction helps the reader articulate the text’s primary claim—that the body’s margins hold analytical centrality for feminist theory—within a much larger theoretical impulse that has fruitfully motivated feminist theory for decades.

If *Gut Feminism*’s broadest claim is about the importance of considering that which is seemingly at the margins—both in a body of scholarship (biology) and in a human body (the gut)—then not only does *Gut Feminism* deliver this claim within its pages, but its very arrival as a sprawling extension of Wilson’s previous thinking productively enacts the point at hand. Insofar

as *Gut Feminism* constitutes Wilson's thinking on the margins of *Psychosomatic*, its very publication demonstrates how important the constant interrogation of limits is to the intellectual vitality of feminist theory. *Gut Feminism* makes a valuable contribution to current feminist theory, queer theory, science studies, and neuroscientific humanities literature and will be of interest to scholars of all levels.