

ARTICLE

Depression, Biology, and Aggression: Introduction to *Gut Feminism*

Elizabeth A. Wilson
Emory University
e.a.wilson@emory.edu

This article is an excerpt from the introduction of Elizabeth Wilson's book, Gut Feminism, published in August, 2015. The excerpt is copyrighted by Duke University Press: <https://www.dukeupress.edu/Gut-Feminism>

The connections between gut and depression have been known, in the West, since ancient Greece. It was the Hippocratic writers who gave the name *melancholia* to states of dejection, hopelessness, and torpor. They understood such states to be caused by an accumulation of black bile (in Greek, *melaina chole*), a substance secreted by the liver. For these writers, and for practitioners of medicine for another two thousand years, melancholia was both the name of one of the enteric humors and the name for a disruption to emotional equilibrium (Jackson, 1986). One of the Hippocratic aphorisms makes the affinity between these two modes of melancholia explicit: "The bowel should be treated in melancholics" (Hippocrates, 1978, p. 217). The condensation of viscera and mood, exemplified in the term *melancholia*, is the subject of *Gut Feminism*. This

book will explore the alliances of internal organs and minded states, not in relation to ancient texts but in the contemporary milieu where melancholias are organized as entanglements of affects, ideations, nerves, agitation, sociality, pills, and synaptic biochemistry. I am not proposing a theory of depression. Rather, I want to extract from these analyses of depressed viscera and mood some gain for feminist theory. I have two ambitions. First, I seek some feminist theoretical gain in relation to how biological data can be used to think about minded and bodily states. What conceptual innovations would be possible if feminist theory wasn't so instinctively antibiological? Second, I seek some feminist theoretical gain in relation to thinking about the hostility (bile) intrinsic to our politics. What if feminist politics are necessarily more destructive than we are able to bear? This introduction offers some context for how feminist theory might approach these tough questions of biology and aggression.

In the first instance, this book makes an argument that biological data can be enormously helpful for feminist theory. By "helpful" I mean "arresting, transforming, taxing." When the project began (with a paper titled "Gut Feminism" at the 2003 Society for Literature and Science convention) my primary concern was to show that feminist theory could find conceptual insight in the biological and pharmacological research on depression. It had been clear to me for some time that there were significant gains to be made by reading biological, evolutionary, and cognitive research more closely (E. A. Wilson, 1998, 2004). I wanted to show that data about the pharmaceutical treatment of depression need not always be the object of feminist suspicion; they could sometimes be the source of conceptual and methodological ingenuity. By 2003 many feminist science studies projects were expanding the ways in which biological data could be apprehended. In the wake of early influential work in feminist philosophy of science and biomedicine (e.g., Ruth Bleier, Donna Haraway, Sandra Harding, Emily Martin), Anne Fausto-Sterling's *Sexing the Body* (2000) and Evelyn Fox Keller's *Century of the Gene* (2000) brought to a wide audience the idea that biology was a site of

important political and conceptual argumentation for feminism, and—in particular—that detailed understanding of biological processes was crucial to such feminist analyses. What followed were a number of important and engaging monographs on feminism, sex, gender, sexuality, capital, biotechnology, and biology: Susan Squier's *Liminal Lives* (2004), Catherine Waldby and Robert Mitchell's *Tissue Economies* (2006), Sarah Franklin's *Dolly Mixtures* (2007), Melinda Cooper's *Life as Surplus* (2008), Marsha Rosengarten's *HIV Interventions* (2009), Hannah Landecker's *Culturing Life* (2010), Rebecca Jordan-Young's *Brain Storm* (2010), Michelle Murphy's *Seizing the Means of Reproduction* (2012), Sarah Richardson's *Sex Itself* (2013)—to name those most prominent on my bookshelves over this decade. However, my interests in *Gut Feminism* are less to do with that body of literature, which continues to flourish (and to provide sustenance for my own thinking), and more to do with the broader field of feminist theory, where biology remains something of a thorny conceptual and political issue and where antibiologism is still valued as currency. This 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—do to—feminist theory. How do biological data arrest, transform, or tax the theoretical foundations of feminist theory?

Gut Feminism begins with the conjecture that despite the burgeoning work in feminist science studies there is still something about biology that remains troublesome for feminist theory. Take, for example, the feminist theoretical work on the body (which was very influential on my training and subsequent work). In the last thirty years, feminists have produced pioneering theories of the body—they have demonstrated how bodies vary across different cultural contexts and historical periods, how structures of gender and sexuality and race constitute bodies in very particular ways, how bodies are being fashioned by biomedical and technological invention. Yet despite its avowed interest in the body, this feminist work is often reluctant to engage directly with biological data. Most feminist research on the body has relied on the methods of social constructionism, which explore how cultural, social, symbolic, or linguistic

constraints govern and sculpt the kinds of bodies we have. These theorists tend not to be very curious about the details of empirical claims in genetics, neurophysiology, evolutionary biology, pharmacology, or biochemistry. This has been true even when biology is the topic at hand. Lynda Birke (2000), for example, provides a thorough overview of the early feminist work on the body. Like me, she is concerned that “the biological body has been peripheral to much feminist theory. . . . The emphasis in our theory was on the *social* construction of gender; the body hardly featured at all” (p. 1–2). Like me, Birke expresses a desire to look inside the body, at the “blood and guts” (p. 48). Nonetheless, and despite her training in neurophysiology and despite her desire to “bring the biological back to feminism” (p. 175), Birke almost entirely avoids discussion of empirical data and focuses her analysis on the gendered narratives, metaphors, and representations that are “etched deep” (p. 41) into biological knowledges. This aversion to biological data is widespread in feminist theories of all stripes. It bespeaks an ongoing discomfort with how to manage biological claims—as if biological data will overwhelm the ability of feminist theory to make cogent conceptual and political interventions.

One thing feminist theory still needs, even after decades of feminist work on the life sciences, is a conceptual toolkit for reading biology. In *Psychosomatic: Feminism and the Neurological Body* (2004) I thought at length about neurological data (the so-called gay brain, the neurophysiology of blushing, the peripheral neurology of neurosis) and their relation to feminist accounts of the body. However, I presumed too readily that lucid explication of biological detail would be enough to detach feminist theory from its conviction that social and discursive analysis are the primary or most powerful tools for engaging biological claims. My introduction to that book ends on a buoyant note: “It is the presumption of this book that sustained interest in biological detail will have a reorganizing effect on feminist theories of the body—that exploring the entanglements of biochemistry, affectivity, and the physiology of the internal organs will provide us with new avenues into the body. Attention to neurological

detail . . . will enable feminist research to move past its dependency on social constructionism and generate more vibrant, biologically attuned account of the body” (Wilson, 2004, p. 14). What I touched on in that book but did not pursue with any vigor was how important antibiologism has been to the successes of feminist theory. There is a powerful paradox in play: antibiologism both places significant conceptual limitations on feminist theory *and* has been one of the means by which feminist theory has prospered. Even as it restricts what feminist arguments can be made, antibiologism still wields the rhetorical power to make a feminist argument seem *right*. Because feminist theory has credentialed itself through these biological refusals, antibiologism is not something that can be easily relinquished. The opening two chapters of *Gut Feminism* tackle this problem directly. They describe this tendency to braid feminist theoretical innovation with antibiologism, and they discuss what legacies that leaves politically and conceptually. Because antibiologism has done such important authorizing work for feminist theory, any intervention that takes a nonparanoid approach to biological and pharmaceutical claims is likely to breach long-standing, dearly held feminist convictions. I anticipate that for many readers *Gut Feminism* is occasionally going to feel politically erroneous, dangerous, or compromised. This book takes that path, assuming that risk, in order to examine the tangle of antibiologism and critical sophistication that underwrites so much feminist argumentation.

As this project unfolded, another problem in relation to feminist theory and biology emerged. With the rise of the so-called neuroscientific turn in the critical humanities and social sciences in the last decade (Fitzgerald & Callard, 2014; Littlefield & Johnson, 2012), feminists and other critics began to take biological claims more seriously. However, they have often done so in a way that was overly credulous about the status of neuroscientific data. This is the coin of antibiologism flipped verso. Where traditionally many feminists have preemptively dismissed biological claims, this new breed of neurologically informed critics want to swallow biological claims whole: “We are living at the hour of neuronal liberation” (Malabou, 2008, p. 8). In analyses like this, engagement with biology has

more often meant betrothal than battle. *Gut Feminism* will intervene into this broad problematic (not enough engagement with biology; too much belief in biology) by reading for what is peripheral in biological and pharmacological theories of depression, and for what the psychoanalyst Sándor Ferenczi called the biological unconscious. By focusing on the neurological periphery (the enteric nervous system that encases the gut) 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. This is one place, it seems to me, where the new neuro-critics have been too compliant with the convention that the neurology that counts is all above the neck. I want to show how some biological and pharmacological data about depression help us think about minded states as enacted not just by the brain but also by the distributed network of nerves that innervates the periphery (especially the gut). My argument is not that the gut *contributes* to minded states, but that the gut *is* an organ of mind: it ruminates, deliberates, comprehends.

These concerns about how to read biology were the first and explicit goal of *Gut Feminism*. These were the key problems that I researched and intended to analyze. The second major consideration of this book emerged from the presentation, revision, and rereading of the manuscript, and it is not something that I had anticipated in the early parts of the project: I found myself making a strong case for the necessary place of aggression (bile) in feminist theory. There are some obvious intellectual antecedents for such a claim (feminist anger; deconstruction; Kleinian psychoanalysis), but the most prominent of these for me has been the so-called antisocial thesis in queer theory. In the latter stages of this project I have been teaching the now canonical queer work of Leo Bersani and Lee Edelman, and I have had to work especially hard against the tendency in students to read self-shattering or negativity as an apolitical force that works to simply undo the coherence of the social or the subject. What

Bersani and Edelman propose is not the punk sentiment that wants “to fail, to make a mess, to fuck shit up” (Halberstam, 2006, p. 824), a sentiment that speaks only to consciously accessible parts of the social fabric and that sees negativity only in the realm of rebellion and antinormativity. One important pedagogical goal of these classes has been to make clear that negativity is intrinsic (rather than antagonistic) to sociality and subjectivity (Berlant & Edelman, 2013), and this makes a world of difference politically. This queer work isn’t antisocial at all; rather, it wants to build theories that can stomach the fundamental involvement of negativity in sociality and subjectivity.

The idea that negativity is indeed *negative* has been a hard lesson to learn. Today (Friday, June 13, 2014), as I sit down to rewrite this introduction, there is a one-day feminist and queer event called “Radical Negativity” at Goldsmiths College, University of London (<http://radicalnegativity.com>). The byline for this event encapsulates a widespread conceptual problem with how to approach negativity and aggression. The conference website describes the event as “an interdisciplinary conference interrogating productive possibilities for negative states of being,” and the description of the conference describes a shared hope to “valorise negative states” in order to “provide the potential to open up new possibilities for politics and connection.” 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. Chapter 3 takes up this argument in depth. There I claim not only that depression is a more outwardly aggressive event than we usually think (it is not just the inward turn of aggression against oneself), but also that this outward turn of hostility is the mark of every political action. In important, unavoidable ways, feminist politics attack and damage the things they love. This encounter with a negativity *that stays negative* continues to be an important thread through chapters 4, 5, and 6, where the particulars of antidepressant treatment are examined. Feminist politics are most effective, I argue, not when they

transform the destructive into the productive, but when they are able to tolerate their own capacity for harm.

References

- Birke, L. (2000). *Feminism and the biological body*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Cooper, M. (2008). *Life as surplus: Biotechnology and capitalism in the neoliberal era*. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press.
- Fausto-Sterling, A. (2000). *Sexing the body*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Fitzgerald, D., & Callard, F. (2014). Social science and neuroscience beyond interdisciplinarity: experimental entanglements. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 0(0), 1-30. doi: 0.1177/0263276414537319
- Franklin, S. (2007). *Dolly mixtures: The remaking of genealogy*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Halberstam, J. (2006). The antisocial thesis in queer theory: The politics of negativity in recent queer theory. *PMLA*, 121(3), 819-828.
- Hippocrates. (1978). *Hippocratic writings*. (G. E. R. Lloyd & J. Chadwick, Trans.). New York, NY: Penguin Books. (Original work published in 1950).
- Jackson, S. W. (1986). *Melancholia and depression: From hippocratic times to modern times*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Jordan-Young, R. M. (2010). *Brain storm*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Keller, E. F. (2000). *The century of the gene*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Landecker, H. (2010). *Culturing life*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Littlefield, M. M., & Johnson, J. (Eds.). (2012). *The neuroscientific turn: Transdisciplinarity in the age of the brain*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.

Malabou, C. (2008). *What should we do with our brain?*. Bronx, NY: Fordham University Press.

Murphy, M. (2012). *Seizing the means of reproduction: Entanglements of feminism, health, and technoscience*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Richardson, S. S. (2013). *Sex itself: The search for male and female in the human genome*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Rosengarten, M. (2009). *HIV Interventions: Biomedicine and the traffic between information and flesh*. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press.

Squier, S. (2004). *Liminal Lives: Imagining the Human at the Frontiers of Biomedicine*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Waldby, C., & Mitchell, R. (2006). *Tissue economies: Blood, organs, and cell lines in late capitalism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Wilson, E. A. (1998). *Neural geographies: Feminism and the microstructure of cognition*. New York, NY: Psychology Press.

Wilson, E. A. (2004). *Psychosomatic: Feminism and the neurological body*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Bio

Elizabeth A. Wilson is professor and chair of the Department of Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, Emory University. She is the author of *Psychosomatic: Feminism and the Neurological Body* (Duke University Press, 2004) and *Affect and Artificial Intelligence* (University of Washington Press, 2010). She is co-writing (with Adam Frank) an introduction to the affect theory of Silvan Tomkins.