

<http://somatosphere.net/2016/08/top-of-the-heap-zoe-h-wool.html>

## Top of the Heap: Zoë H. Wool

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By Hannah Gibson



**For this installment of the Top of the Heap series, I spoke with Zoë H. Wool, who is a medical anthropologist and assistant professor at Rice University in Texas.**

The invitation to contribute to the Top of the Heap felt like such a treat...and then sent me into a tailspin of professional anxiety (Alexander I. Stingl laid out the dilemma of the decision in his recent contribution). I was tempted to take the most literal approach, since I am, despite my love of orderly library shelves, a heaper of books.

Should I simply snatch the tops off a few of my many heaps, growing like stalagmites on the flat surfaces of my home and office and give you David Mitchell's [The Biopolitics of Disability](#), Roy Scranton's [War Porn](#), and the Linen Source summer blowout catalogue? But what about all the rich material exposed by such gross heaptop removal? Hellooooo, down there! I promise to return to you, [Queer Disability Anthology](#)! And I'm sorry that you are smothered by a still shrink-wrapped copy of [Habeas Viscus](#), my moldy copy of [The Elementary Structures of Kinship](#), and that feathery pile of conference receipts overdue for reimbursement filing!

No. Better to begin by thinking about thinking. So here are some books

that I'm reading, rereading, or about to read, as I think about bodies, and their problems, kinds, and attendant obligations, both in relation to courses I'm teaching on disability, illness, and enhancement and in relation to a new project I've been incubating for a few years. The project is about those things, and also about non-institutional, informal, domestic 'care' and 'caregiving' in two worlds between which there is almost no traffic: injured veterans and disability communities, particularly queer ones.

Drawing on decades of work with African American families raising severely ill or disabled children, Cheryl Mattingly's [Moral Laboratories](#) (UC Press 2014) is an intervention into the vital conversations happening in the anthropology of ethics. Instead of engaging directly with disability theory, Mattingly traces people's attempts to cultivate flourishing in a context of suffering where much seems overdetermined by race and class more than disability but where people 'experiment' in the spaces of the possible. These spaces are fleeting 'moral laboratories' that continually open, even in the face of seemingly relentless personal (and structural) tragedy. Mattingly understands these experiments through a framework of first person (as opposed to third person) virtue ethics, reflecting carefully along the way about the pluralistic and sometimes contradictory meanings and practices of the good life.

The last year or so has been terrific for feminist engagements with the stuff and science of the body, perhaps the biggest corner of the new feminist materialism tent. Most notable to me are two books on my summer reading list, Victoria Pitts-Taylor's [The Brain's Body](#) (Duke 2016) and Elizabeth Wilson's [Gut Feminism](#) (Duke 2015). One or both of these will probably also end up on my syllabus for a Bodies, Technologies, Enhancements seminar this fall.

*Gut Feminism* (Duke 2015) is Wilson's follow up to her dense, brief, and glorious [Psychosomatic](#) (Duke 2004) and shares a title with her 2004 article in *Differences* that is a kind of coda to that book and prelude to this one. *Gut Feminism* the article brings Freud contemporary Sandor Ferenczi's concept of the biological unconscious into the gut—specifically, the unique, biosocially conditioned bulimic gut—where it meets 90% of the body's serotonin and the question of why SSRIs have been successful in treating bulimia. *Gut Feminism* the book elaborates this space, with a special interest in how feminism and pharmaceutical data might productively metabolize each other. With *Psychosomatic*, it is part of Wilson's broader project to rethink the relationship of feminism and biology, psychiatry, and neuroscience, which she does across the history of modern neurology with deep and careful aplomb. I am always thrilled to go along for the ride, and am looking forward to another 'look ma, no hands!' experience of thinking with her this summer.

In conversation with Wilson's work, Victoria Pitts-Taylor's *The Brain's Body* (Duke 2016) is an effort to hold contemporary neuroscience and its particular figuring of brain and body to critical account, taking neuroscience seriously but also calling out the dangerous modes of reductionist thinking that dissolve structural inequality into biological difference. I was excited about earlier iterations of this project, like her 2013 *Hypatia* [piece](#) on mirror neurons, affect theory, and intersubjectivity, which addressed questions of relationality and embodiment. I'm looking forward to seeing more in the book, especially as she takes on kinship which I'm also attempting to rethink at the moment.

[Feminist, Queer, Crip](#) (Indiana 2013) is Alison Kafer's collection of interrelated essays that have been making their way deep into the collective anthropological unconscious over the past couple of years. The book is essential reading for anyone thinking with disability theory (which, I imagine I need not specify to Somatosphere readers includes people not working specifically on disability). As with other important work in the space of crip theory, Kafer leverages the resonances and overlaps between the social, cultural, and political positions of queers and disabled people into new modes of critical thought and political engagement across categories of identity or axis of oppression. One of the things I like best about Kafer's work is her refusal to cut the Gordian knots that animate it—she generates new trajectories as she makes ambivalence into a seriously thoughtful craft. Of particularly broad value in *Feminist, Queer, Crip* is Kafer's work on temporality, in which she pushes Judith Halberstam's thinking about queer time beyond itself by exploring temporalities of illness and disability that in some ways are precisely queer in Halberstam's sense, but that also require a certain shift in celebratory queer politics in order to address the forms of structural violence and eugenic desire that shape them.

Part of my new project involves an experiment to unseat the family, anchored in the conjugal couple, as the basic unit of human sociality. To help me think about this I've been revisiting some foundational texts and I have recently found myself drawn to Shulamith Firestone's 1970 radical feminist classic [The Dialectic of Sex](#), an imaginative indictment of heteronormative arrangements of both capital and care. I want to devote some time this summer to seeing how it might help me think not specifically, or not only, beyond the patriarchal situation of women in the home, but to think about a politics of intimacy beyond the family more generally.

Given the heights to which some elevate the designation, I'm not sure I'm worthy of claiming to be a serious [Start Trek: The Next Generation](#) fan. But let me put it this way: I've seen most episodes multiple times and used to have the Enterprise on my personal cheques. Despite (or perhaps

because of?) all its considerable essentializing and smug liberalism, there is virtually no key dilemma or animating question in anthropology that TNG hasn't dealt with directly or played out in workable allegorical form. When presented with the opportunity, I like to point this out to my students. This must be at least a little effective, since, I am proud to say, a former student recently sent me [Star Trek Archives: Best of The Borg](#) as a token of her appreciation. It currently tops my nightstand.

There are also lots of exciting things on the horizon. Elizabeth Povinelli's [Geontologies](#) (Duke 2016) will be out this fall, and I'm keen to see the full articulation of her effort to move away from biopolitical distinctions between life and death and toward a geontological distinction between life and non-life, while taking on plasticity, new materialism, and antinormativity in the offing. Think big! Eli Clair's new book on the politics of cure will be out from Duke in the next year or so, and I imagine I will devour it quickly and spend the next month seeing the political dynamics of cure everywhere. I was also very excited to learn that Sunara Taylor's first book [Beasts of Burden: Animal and Disability Liberation](#) will be out in Feb 2017 from The New Press. It promises to push our thinking about the human, the non-human, and the inhuman in new ways, and generate some productive political friction in the offing.

Now, once more into the heaps!



*Zoë H. Wool is Assistant Professor of Anthropology at Rice University, where she teaches about bodies, care, disability, intimacy, and the uneven valuing of fleshy life in the contemporary United States. Her first book, *After War: The Weight of Life at Walter Reed* was published by Duke University Press in 2015.*

Photo: Girl Reading Inside a Book.

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