

*Somatosphere Presents*

A Book Forum on

*Gut Feminism*

by Elizabeth A. Wilson

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Elizabeth Wilson's [Gut Feminism](#) revisits feminism's traditionally antagonistic engagement with biology with a call to reposition the body in feminist thought. As Wilson critically explores relationships between guts and melancholia, pharmacokinetics and bile, psyche and soma, she generates tools and insights for a new feminist reading of biology, and articulates the role of aggression as a necessary condition for feminist politics. These commentaries tease apart and extend aspects of Wilson's arguments, each one metabolizing the pill to produce transformed understandings. We hope you enjoy!



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## Comment on Gut Feminism

DES FITZGERALD

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Mid-way through the introduction to *Gut Feminism*, Elizabeth Wilson pauses to think about the literature on abdominal migraine, and the variously psychogenic and biochemical properties that have been thought to animate that experience. Against a clinical literature that insists on understanding abdominal migraine (an acute midline stomach pain, most common in children) as a cerebral migraine pushed to the periphery of the nervous system, Wilson asks: what if abdominal migraine was not the site of an (as yet) unresolved relationship between centre and periphery, or body and mind? What if it was a sign of the sometimes painful ways in which these agencies inhabit one another? ‘The periphery is interior to the centre,’ she reminds us: ‘the stomach is interior to mind’ (14).

Interiority is as good a place as any to centre the stakes of this profoundly enlivening text. What agencies, deeply interior to feminist theoretical and political work, have been made peripheral in the desire for conceptual purchase? Biology, for sure; aggression too. What would it mean, then, to re-situate conceptual labour *vis-à-vis* the interiority of anatomy and hostility, not in the deadening spirit of *rapprochement*, but as material and affective states that can, might – have to be – suffered? Could we bear them? What would it be like to try? In pursuit of the relationship between stomach and mood, *Gut Feminism* mobilizes such questions to extend a line of thought from Wilson’s *Neural Geographies* (1998) and *Psychosomatic* (2004) – works that entwine feminist theory within particular readings of psychoanalytic and neurobiological case-work, until all three objects enter into a kind of mutual undoing and remaking. *Gut Feminism* shares with those earlier volumes a knack for not only making this ‘work’ – but for making it seem utterly necessary, and vital, and *right*.

At its heart is a proposal to think relations and interiorities in determinedly anticonsilient mode (170): tacking back and forth between agencies that have structured the relation of gut to mood, Wilson unspools a range of dyads that have energised feminist work – psychoanalysis and psychopharmacology, depression and aggression, reparation and negativity, stomach and brain, biological data and feminist theory. The goal is neither the self-satisfied displacement of dichotomy, nor simple-minded consilience – rather, Wilson pursues the crucial work of

understanding how the hostility that animates these pairs is a relation of intimacy too; of showing how intimacy is the neither reparative nor conciliatory – nor does it repudiate the negativity that holds the relation together. What emerges is an account of negativity that is insistently *negative* (6) – a deeply challenging feminist politics of harm that refuses the comforts of both strategy and solution.

I have nothing less banal to say than that I loved this book. To use the unavoidable euphemism: I swallowed it whole. But here – rather against the spirit of the book itself – is a question about the future. ‘What conceptual innovations would be possible,’ Wilson asks at the beginning, ‘if feminist theory wasn’t so instinctively antibiological?’ (1). To which I cannot but add: what would be made possible by a feminist theory that wasn’t so instinctively *theoretical*? This question is less about *Gut Feminism* than the communities that will devour it: are those of us in such communities in danger of splitting the (conceptual work of) theory from (the empirical labour of) biology – i.e. a desire to theorize materiality that does not always translate well into doing material things? Are we at any risk of having our cake, and ingesting it too? I know I’m belabouring divisions that the text displaces, but I cannot help but wonder what an honest-to-goodness gut-feminist *laboratory* practice would look like. Or: what might it mean to not only gain from biological data, but to actually *constitute*, perhaps in collaboration, feminist-biological-theory-data? What forms of intimacy and hostility would such a project engage? What might it show us about consilience? That it invites such speculation is only another tribute to *Gut Feminism*: it is what I have been thinking about ever since I finished this deeply engrossing, intensely energising work.

[Des Fitzgerald](#) is a Lecturer in Sociology at Cardiff University. He is a sociologist of science and medicine, with a particular interest in the history and present of the neurosciences. He is co-author (with Felicity Callard) of [Rethinking interdisciplinarity across the social sciences and neurosciences](#) and author of the forthcoming [Tracing Autism: Uncertainty, Ambiguity, and the Affective Labor of Neuroscience](#).

## Incisive Gutting – and Tolerating a Capacity for Harm

MEGAN WARIN

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Have you ever held entrails in your hands? Like long sausages they slip and slide, warm, feeling strangely seductive yet evoking disgust. To feel the visceral insides of any body is strange (unless you are a butcher or surgeon). I've had Elizabeth Wilson's book in my hand a few days now, thrown inside my bag and taken out later at night to read. The book now sits next to me, and something shiny draws me in to look at the cover. Intently, I start to peer through the bold typeface of her title, through to the image it cuts and hides. I draw the book closer, my perspective shifts and I see the shiny pillows of gut viscera, the purple sheen of curved intestines and yellow globules of mesenteric fat. I immediately search for the details of this image and find them on the back cover. This is the work of elin o'Hara slavick, a Professor of Visual Art, Theory and Practice at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Her photograph shows the spilled guts of a just-slaughtered cow, and is called 'Global Economy'.

I want to linger on this image as I think it raises the central provocations of this book. This image turns things inside out, insides of bodies on the outside of the book. Insides and outsides together, not as separate entities, but 'cut' literally and conceptually (in Karen Barad's terms) by the words on the page. This jarring of opposites is not intended to shock; these are not conventional opposites 'radically detached from each other' (143). Binaries are conceptual demarcations that 'ensnare us all' (146), but in this book (as an on-going intellectual endeavor) Wilson wants to move beyond 'components' and investigate the ways that guts, minds, pills and neurology cohabit, entwine, and annex each other as they 'bind, braid, branch and cleave' (150); in other words, how they are all inherently shaped by one another. This is the intra-action of words and biological agencies.

Wilson makes a valid case for the central role that feminist theories have had in the historical relationships of dismissing biology, and she clearly draws inspiration from feminists who have critically engaged with the reworking of nature and culture. She doesn't want to push biology away like second wave feminists have done, like water repelling oil. Joining feminist calls for a

renewed alliance between feminist work and biological processes (including nods to feminist science studies and ‘new’ material feminist scholars), she describes betrothals and battles between historical figures and modes of thought. Rubin and Kipnis’ arguments are used to show how feminist theory got itself trapped in relation to biology; Freud and Ferenczi’s friendship became strained in their handwritten letter exchanges over the volatility of anatomy and the biological unconscious, and in the chapter “Bitter Melancholy,” Wilson shows how depression is not anger turned inwards as the Freudian hypothesis suggests, but an outward aggression. In each of these cases neurological data and critical inquiry of eating, digestion, vomiting, lumps in throats, bodily fluids, hunger, sex, gut, brain, nerves and will, ‘meet and cut across each other’ (176), demonstrating the importance of ‘thinking biology dynamically’.

In beautiful historical detail Wilson succeeds in drawing critical attention away from the centre (brain) and bending it towards the periphery (gut) (99). This book is in itself a ‘fantastic voyage’ of pharmaceuticals as they travel and dissolve in and around many different agencies in the alimentary tract, metabolic pathways and organs of the body (and not just in the brain). We are repeatedly directed to the inseparability of psyche and soma which are ‘always already coevolved and coentangled’ (66). Here, Wilson emphasizes that depression is a more outwardly aggressive event than currently (and historically) thought, and that this outward expression of hostility is the mark of every political action. These are not politically inert matters. In light of cries that such biological leanings are unpolitical, Wilson cites Derrida’s *pharmakon* to show the aggressive ambiguity of harm and remedy working in tandem. This dissonant alliance is a sharp reminder to counter my desire to err on one side, of recto (critique) or verso (scientific ebullience).

Hannah Landecker suggests that some readers will devour this book and others will throw it across the room. I have done the former (and perhaps we should do both), but in the moment of devouring and trying to absorb the analysis, it spills, dissolves, changes structure and transforms. As much as I desire to be drawn to this, I also want to capture spills and hold on to entrails, wedded to social anthropological modes of rationalization which are deeply embedded and embodied in my training. Yet guts, gut distress, gut mindedness, gutting and being gutted slide across each other in so many assemblages, touching histories, theories, medicine, pharmacology and psychoanalysis. Feminism, biology, pills, placebos and guts are all thrown into a ‘vertiginous’ space which is not seamless or unified, but full of consiliences, hostilities and political encounters. This is alluring scholarship and perfect in its timing in

arguing 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).

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## A Strange Kind of Sad

HARRIS SOLOMON

*Duke University*

*Dear Diary,*

*Everyone is sad, but it's a strange kind of sad.*

-Veronica Sawyer (Winona Ryder) in *Heathers* (1988)

Elizabeth Wilson's *Gut Feminism* hovers on the challenge to "cultivate capacities to harm." In this intricate book, Wilson explores what might happen if feminist theory consumed biology differently. Feminist theory must do so by "reading" biology through the apparatus of the gut. For Wilson, the gut is a "peripheral body" (13). But however peripheral, in its grip lies the possibility for living with bitterness. You can nibble on your hobbyhorse all you like, as Wilson notes feminist theory has done in certain modes with its critique of biology. But please do dispense with the surprise when you figure out that your object is half-eaten and it's still inside you.

This is critique based on the capacities to become familiar with the harm inside the self and the intellect. It is critique based on biology of the periphery "routed through the gut," (171). With keen attention to the ways that guts depress us, enliven us, and mobilize us to think, Wilson is clear that any bile between feminism and biology is grounds for progress in feminist thought: "A feminist theory that tries to apprehend the harms that are native to its own conceptual and political actions is a more robust endeavor than one that tries, vainly, to make itself pure of heart. Such a theoretical stance takes up more room, it generates more possibilities (and thus more risks): it has more bite" (167).

Wilson's reminders are constant: this stance is not easy. One must endure the indigestion that follows the bite. Casting this necessary position as an "encounter with negativity that stays negative," Wilson takes the reader through re-ruminations on Rubin, Freud, Klein, Kristeva, and others in the book's first section; and engagements with the pharmacopolitics of depression in the second section. Across both, the text questions what might be possible when one's empirical, affective, and authorial mission is "gratifyingly unpleasurable" (81).

This sense of disquieting digestion, of rumbly reading, brought to my mind (my gut?) the 1988 film *Heathers*. In *Heathers*, guts rule the school. Its scenes burst with food, with eating, with puking, with fat shaming.<sup>1</sup> Bulimia grips one member of the titular clique, Heather Duke (although the original clique leader, Heather Chandler, chides her to "Grow up, Heather, bulimia is so '87"). Eating brains marks incredulity ("Did you have a brain tumor for breakfast?" Chandler asks Duke, who dares to hope that Chandler might let her win at croquet). The third Heather, Heather McNamara, has a penchant for eating pills.

Substances squeeze through guts. The fringe member of the clique, Veronica Sawyer, vomits from too much booze at a college party. In doing so, Sawyer lets fly her barely-contained patience for Chandler's reign as queen bee (Chandler: "What's my thanks? I got paid in puke;" Sawyer: "Lick it up, baby, lick it up."). But following Wilson, we are reminded: Don't eat your desire and pay it back in puke. Let it rumble. Processing it is unlikely to be pleasant.<sup>2</sup>

In the first of several murders that Veronica and her bad-boy accomplice JD stage as suicides, Heather Chandler drinks blue drain cleaner on a dare. Before collapsing face-first to shatter a glass table, she clasps her throat and wheezes the only thing she can reckon as the source of her deathly gurgle: "Corn nuts!" Here, guts set the terms of the film's exploration of the intractable melancholy of closeness. Veronica, taking in the scene of Chandler's body moments after the fall, realizes: "I just killed my best friend!" JD retorts, "And your worst enemy." Veronica clarifies: "Same difference!" Same difference, indeed: This figure of the frenemy glues together the film's sociality, across scenes of depression and suicide (staged, or otherwise) as the ingredients of desire.

The lessons of the *Gut Feminism* and its pipeline into forms of friendship and enmity drew me to the film. But the book also reminds me of more quotidian scenes of pedagogy in university life. These include my own attempts to teach medical anthropology, and specifically, to teach the in-betweenness of the biocultural. Wilson reminds us that when the gut grinds, it hurts. Perhaps this explains the uneasy feeling I get when my own students seem to eat up the idea that *both* biology and culture make the world turn. It's felt like the right starting point, this

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<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., Cecil 2008 and Shary 2014 for readings of the film grounded in the problem of aggression and bullying; but this is certainly a problem of friendship, too.

<sup>2</sup> "As well as attaching to things that are damaging us (Berlant 2011), we are also trying to damage the things to which we are attached," Wilson explains (85).



comfort with *both*, but it also feels stuck somewhere in the rut of things. Do both really sit so easily close together? "In-between" always seemed like a nice story to feed, but the fantasy of reparation doesn't stay down easily (and nor should it, Wilson's text teaches me). I wonder what a bilious classroom lesson might look like...a space of scientific and philosophical instruction anchored in the figure of the frenemy rather than simply the friend.

For is this not, after all, about the power to edify and enervate friendship? In *Heathers*, bile and power pass from one body to the next. Upon the death of Heather Chandler, Heather Duke ascends as clique leader. She even begins eating again ("Watch it, Heather, you might be digesting food there," Veronica remarks). Duke keeps up the game, scheming her way to top of the popularity pyramid. Utterly frustrated, Veronica asks her: "Heather, why can't you just be a friend?" Veronica desires closeness with no bite. Why must Heather be a cannibal? Heather Duke has a simple answer: "Because I can be," she says breezily. She wants to eat her way to the top, with no side effects, and with no reminders of what's gone down the gullet.

Wilson unhinges the fantasy that arcs across Heather and Veronica in this scene. It is a fantasy of non-solitary nearness with none of the itch of the other, of insatiable sovereign power with no periphery. But digestion always entails collateral damage even as it nourishes: this is what *Gut Feminism* teaches us. Many have tried to anchor critique somewhere between niceness and enmity, between reparation and paranoia. But Wilson's gut-work offers a different pedagogy. This is because digestion is a motive apparatus. The motility of relations entails sharp edges: Edges between feminism and biology, between friends, between enemies, between the self and its turn to inexplicable depression. It's a strange kind of sad, but it keeps on moving.

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## Stomachaches

AMBER BENEZRA

*New York University*

Where is the gut? A corporeal and metaphorical space, our gut is the suggestion of invisible viscera, our most sensitive internal self— soft and vulnerable, near the surface, and barely covered by muscle and skin. The gut is where the outside world comes in, and where the inside threatens to come out. *Spill your guts*. Gut idioms range from fortitude and courage (*that takes guts, do you have the guts?*), to instinct (*trust your gut, gut feelings*), to representing our essential selves (*I hate your guts*).

In studying human microbiomes, I have seen guts when the in becomes the out: mice sacrificed and dissected, blood and epithelium exposed to oxygen, tiny stomachs split and scraped. I have seen human guts in pain: a confluence of urban poverty and diarrheal disease so severe the body can't stay nourished. I have seen what guts produce: bacterial genomes sequenced from human feces for clues about the intestinal landscape. A human microbial ecologist once said to me, "With human samples, feces is all you have. You have to make a story from that." When you deal in guts, shit is inexorable.

And so, *Gut Feminism* puts the reader in the middle of it, so to speak. Elizabeth Wilson makes the gut a nexus, a place where feminism, biology, and aggression are necessary, uncomfortable interlocutors. In previous work, Wilson has lamented the traction feminist theories of the body and embodiment have lost by eschewing biological data. In this book, she has a clearer argument: that a better, more generous engagement with biology will reanimate and transform the foundations of feminist theory, "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—feminism" (2).<sup>3</sup> And indeed, the call for feminist theorists to finally develop a conceptual toolkit in which we can take biomedical data seriously but not literally (12), is a timely one. Many have written about disarticulating biology and culture, and recently about

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<sup>3</sup> The book has a secondary consideration, concerning rhetorics of hostility, bile, aggression, and an assertion that feminist politics must learn to tolerate its own capacity for harm (6). This matter does not feel like it is located in the gut, it seems perhaps to be located in the appendix, a distal but related site that may have some valuable purchase that is not yet apparent.

rematerializing matter. But so far, difficulties remain in getting different disciplinary knowledges or different data to actually transact, what Wilson describes at one point as “a way of articulating those nonlinearities with each other . . . realms both align and dissociate, how they are antagonistically attached” (106), bringing to mind Strathern, Mol, and Barad.

And Wilson doesn't totally solve this problem. She works through an analysis of the pharmacokinetics of antidepressants and placebos, suicidal ideation and bulimia—taking the gut as a site of metabolization and politics. Starting with the premise that the gut is an organ of the mind (is always minded), Wilson uses new theories of biopsychiatry to try to productively process pharmaceutical data. Not to critically deconstruct it, but use it. She explores the organic interior of the gut and its psychic nature (23), rejecting the notion that stomach and mood were never not coentangled, that psyche and soma were ever not coevolved. How pills, synapses, gag reflexes, and depression transform and interact in the gut is contingent on emotion and environment.

Yet Wilson's most powerful provocation is not in offering solutions, but in recognizing just how crucial it is that we start trying to figure out “pathways by which biological data can become critically mobile” (175). This is compelling and brave. She warns from the outset that some will find *Gut Feminism* “politically erroneous, dangerous, or compromised” (4), which I have no doubt some do. Just as the terrain of the gut is a lightless, airless mystery, so is *how* to alter the DNA of feminist theory, within which a rejection of biology is already deeply programmed (30). She urges us to escape these traps, to move past a consideration of biology as both irrelevantly peripheral and politically threatening.

As with the body's nervous system in Wilson's analysis, maybe the center is not where we thought it was. Her book is a starting place, an incitement to do better with the data of other disciplines, data that has a transformative potential for feminist thinking. The gut absorbs, metabolizes, and excretes; it also ruminates, deliberates, and comprehends.

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## Reply

ELIZABETH WILSON

*Emory University*

How does one use a book? We are well trained in how to read a book. We know how to interpret, decipher or clarify the content of the pages we read. But what about a different kind of engagement with a book? One less immediately oriented toward the satisfactions of comprehension and discernment and more oriented to use.

I am not thinking here of how a book can be intellectually useful--what it might contribute to current debates, what problems it might elucidate, what novel arguments it might forge. Important as all these goals are, this is not exactly what I have in mind right now. Des Fitzgerald provides a metaphor for the kind of engagement I am thinking of: how a book might be devoured ("I swallowed it whole"). That is, I am interested in how a book is chewed on and chewed up--how it is used--in the service of other projects. How it might be deployed (for better and for worse) for ends that it didn't envisage. A necessary part of such use, it seems to me, is that the book will be damaged in some way. So one thought I have for the future of this book is not just how it is read but also whether or not it will survive the way it is used. What will this book (and the feminist theory it advances) look like on the other side of its use by others?

The readings of Gut Feminism that Amber Benezra, Des Fitzgerald, Harris Solomon, and Megan Warin have posted here provide me with the full happiness of recognition. Benezra accurately understands that the book tries to offer provocations ("stomach and mind were never not coentangled") rather than solutions. Fitzgerald skillfully expands and elaborates the question of interiority in Gut Feminism ("What agencies, deeply interior to feminist theoretical and political work, have been made peripheral in the desire for conceptual purchase?"). Solomon affirms the difficult and indissoluble enmeshment of "friendship and enmity" by discussing what is, of course, one of my favorite movies (Heathers). Similarly, Warin has rightly identified that the "ambiguity of harm and remedy" is, for me, an aggressive and dissonant matter. All four writers show a strong command of the central ambitions of Gut Feminism, and this is immensely gratifying. As the author, there is something comforting in these readings

and the recognition they confer. More specifically, it is encouraging to think that these readings might initiate uses of the book that I have not anticipated.

As Barbara Johnson notes in her beautiful reading of D. W. Winnicott, using people is a necessary condition for the emergence of the subject. We tend to think of using people as bad conduct (“transforming others into a means for obtaining an end for oneself [is] the very antithesis of ethical behavior” Johnson 2008, p. 94). Winnicott has been able to show, however, that the capacity to use objects (by which he means both people and things) is an important developmental accomplishment for the infant and an ongoing necessity for adult relationality. Winnicott doesn’t shrink from the fact that this kind of use is destructive: “the object is ... excitedly loved and mutilated” (p. 99). Importantly, some objects have the seemingly magical capacity to be destroyed and to endure—they are able survive my consumption of them: “the properly used object is one that survives destruction” (p. 101). The analyst is paradigmatically such an object. I need to use the analyst (rage at her, love her, distrust her, leave her) and experience her survival of my use. Without this encounter, I will likely be “trapped in a narcissistic lock in which nothing but approval and validation, or disapproval and invalidation, can be experienced” (p. 101). For Winnicott, this part of the relationship between analyst and patient (I use her; she survives) happens to one side of the classical interpretive work that normal occupies an analytic hour. Object use produces a certain kind of encounter that interpretive work can approach but not fully enact.

My hope is that Gut Feminism might be a properly used object. As Benezra notes, this book doesn’t offer solutions for the problems of biology and feminism. There are no blueprints for a new feminist materialism. Indeed I remain skeptical about the intellectual value of clustering divergent projects together under rubrics like new feminist materialism. Such designations help order a syllabus or book series or conference panel, but too often (it seems to me) they narrow the interpretive work that can be done and they limit the kinds of uses to which our projects can be put. I hope that the thematics of negativity, noticed by all four of these commentators, will emerge as an invitation for the book to be used by the reader and in turn for the reader to be open to use. There have been virtuoso interpretations (especially in queer theory) of the negativity that constitutes sociality. The destructiveness championed in Gut Feminism is attuned more to the paradox of object destruction-survival: “Hullo object!” “I destroyed you” “I love you” (Winnicott in Johnson, p. 103). Following on from the endorsement of Hannah Landecker, I do indeed hope that this book will be thrown across the room, that it might be mutilated and loved (for one entails the other). My thanks to Benezra,

Fitzgerald, Solomon, and Warin for finding something in these arguments that might render the book less like an inert object, and more like something to be used, and so make the book more transitional and fantastic than the author on her own is able to do.

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