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Book Review: Elizabeth Wilson's Gut Feminism

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Wilson, E. (2015). *Gut feminism*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 240 pp. \$23.95. ISBN: 9780822359708

Elizabeth A. Wilson's *Gut Feminism* (2015) starts with the avowal that her monograph is not another attempt to propose "a theory of depression" (biological or otherwise) (p. 1); rather, she proffers that one of her main objectives is to invite readers to think about the ways in which biological data can be utilized, interpreted, and exploited in favor of feminist politics. In contrast to the long-entrenched anti-biologism of feminist politics, Wilson situates the substrata of the gut at the center of her project, which illustrates the importance of theoretically experimenting with the potential meanings of 'having the guts' to do feminist science. This concern with biomedical data and feminist politics of antidepressants leads Wilson to call for a different mode of feminist politics – one that can realize and appreciate the 'necessary' (p)ills of "tolerat[ing] their own capacity for harm" (p. 6). In this review, I engage with Wilson's main arguments in relation to what she calls the incipience of 'anti-biologism' in feminist theory, and then I interpret how Wilson's case studies contribute to the overall framing of her theses. Ultimately, I highlight potential uses of the book for teaching in feminist and queer classrooms.

Opposed to the post-Foucauldian mistrust of feminist theory towards the biomedical sciences, Wilson embraces a non-paranoid relationality towards the vicissitudes of the biological body and the mind. The significance of Wilson's reexamination of the triangular relationship between feminism, depression, and the gut lies in the way she provides an innovative model for a peripheral understanding of the viscera. Tracing the historical trajectories of melancholia to the current state of affairs in the clinic, Wilson familiarizes readers with debates in psychological and neurobiological sciences, through which she hopes to reimagine the oft-abjected questions of hostility and aggression. As she revisits the infamous Freud-Ferenczi dispute about the role of biology in conversions, Wilson's reading of Ferenczi's writings allows her to conclude that "psyche and soma ... are always already coevolved and coentangled" (p. 66). Highlighting Ferenczi's concepts of 'organic thought' and 'materializations,' Wilson underscores the theoretical utility of embracing the notion of 'biological unconscious' and what it can offer to the vexed relationship between the body and its debated position in feminist theorization. This results in Wilson's argument that "damage to others is an inevitable effect of being in relation with others" (p. 71).

In the second part of her book, Wilson provides a series of empirical, quantitative research in recent biomedical and neurohumanities literature. While she takes on the "pharmacokinetics of the SSRIs," Wilson seeks to demonstrate how antidepressants work with the entire body (not solely the central nervous system) and that the biological periphery is a separate, total constitutive of the mind, rather than an auxiliary element, in minded bodily states. Recognizing theoretical exploits in the clinical concept of transference, Wilson suggests her readers entertain the idea that transference and interpretation are not limited to the clinic but can be reimaged in the power of biology to challenge, trouble, and decenter

the hegemonic modes of biomedical knowledge production. As she experiments with the concept of 'biochemical relationality,' Wilson argues there are multiple forms of permeability, not only between pills and the synapses but also between the so-called 'separate' spheres: the synaptic and the social. In her final case study, Wilson tackles the question of the role of antidepressants in suicidal ideation, leading her to conclude that "it is not possible to build a successful scene of antidepressive treatment that doesn't also necessarily do some (serotonergic, social) harm" (p. 155).

Even though Wilson succeeds in implementing the concept of 'pharmakon' in Derrida's (1981) reading of *Phaedrus* as an axiomatic duo that both damages and ameliorates, her dual model of antidepressants as 'remedy + poison' seems to be an intellectual experiment rather than a case evidenced by robust, empirical data. While her examination of the extensive literature of neurobiological and psychiatric literature is remarkable, Wilson's arguments in this part of the book do not quite live up to the level of cogency and persuasiveness explicit in the previous theory section. Nonetheless, this seems to stem from a paucity of studies in the field with similar feminist interests that delve into biomedical research. Although Wilson admits that her book does not provide a singular, coherent set of hypotheses that can be tested and resolved easily, she argues that this 'dissonant alliance' between biology and feminist theory is precisely the ground from which future researchers might venture forth if they can manage to situate themselves outside what she calls the confining binarism of "neuro-skepticism and neuro-enthusiasm" (p. 174). At this critical conjunction, it becomes exigent to heed Wilson's words in exploring the minded capacities of organic matters in the very materiality of bodies.

One of the most significant contributions of the book to feminist neuro/biohumanities is the artful way it renders comprehensible even the most obtuse theoretical debates in psychological sciences and feminist theories of body and mind. Despite the arcane nature of the topics the author grapples with, the detailed notes section at the end may serve as a facilitative tool to ease the reading process for students that are new to feminist theory and feminist psychoanalytic discourse. For instance, her criticism of Rubin's canonical texts and her novel reading of Klein's phantastical developmentalism provide fruitful opportunities for close reading exercises and group discussions. The author's attempts at theorizing 'non-redemptive' futures of feminist politics can serve as a creative anchor for educators to prompt their students to brainstorm and speculate about feminist futures, possibly in higher-level feminist classes. There is great potential in Wilson's daring question of what can and cannot happen if feminist theory fails to mobilize its capacities and cultivate its tolerance towards harm, hostility, and aggression not just against ourselves but also against our loved objects.

References

Derrida, J. (1981). Plato's pharmacy. In B. Johnson (trans.), *Dissemination* (pp. 61-117). University of Chicago.