if not, in anticipation, a lifetime – careful tracking of the labor, and of the value of the labor, involved in that investment. In fact, it could be a fitbit nightmare involving a profound instrumentalization of the daily care we take of ourselves, the submission of our varied care regimens to an algorithm that draws on data from increasingly sophisticated activity trackers to quantify and calculate the possible future value of every moment’s activity. We can imagine the admonishing logo: are you investing in your future? This route seems to be an elaboration and adoption of the very neoliberal, biopolitical comprehension of the self within the material and speculative machinery of the bioeconomy of which Cooper and Waldby are critical.

Indeed, following upon that whiff of a neoliberal flavor, we can see that both of these options are profoundly individualizing, attempting to locate and articulate value in the activities of embodied individuals in particular. In doing so, they seem to sidestep one of the other insights of Marx’s historical materialism which is that production is an ineluctably social process. Of course, Cooper and Waldby know this. It is evident in their expansive historical tale, in their observation that regenerative labor also creates “experimen-tal relations” (p. 107), in their recommendation that we refrain from thinking about tissue donation as a transfer of rights between individuals and conceive of it instead as “a thoroughgoing collaboration” (p. 100) and in their analysis of the distributed labor of self experimentation with off-label drug use by diffuse online communities of drug users.

If we were to foreground the social character of the labor that drives the bioeconomy, we could accommodate some of the paradoxes that arise from the effort to give theoretical articulation to generative and degenerative labor. According to Cooper and Waldby’s analysis, it is tricky finally to determine who might own the products of regenerative and degenerative labor (p. 219) because both forms of labor confound the distinction between consumption and production (p. 44) and “blur … the boundaries between passive and active participation, the subject and object of labor” (p. 135) to such an extent that a self-object becomes an activity, “the patient’s uninsured body … a form of labor” (p. 173). The self that is also matter, the material that becomes, the tissue that is degenerative and regenerative activity: these seeming antinomies are integral to the conceptual problems that animate the new materialisms. And they suggest that what is at issue in clinical labor is not only our conception of labor but also our conception of the agent of research and production. Bioeconomic research and production is accomplished and made possible not by a single heroic scientist manipulating a disowned piece of flesh but by a bevy of scholars and experiment designers, technicians and project managers, who coordinate with clerical staff and janitorial staff to deploy material and social technologies to work with people who work on themselves to give themselves over to practices exploring and exploiting bio-potentiality. To consider bioeconomic research and production in this way would be to think in terms of an integrated research collaborative – a network, an assemblage – that could distribute the cost of the risks and the profits of innovation to all involved. But then again, just writing that down provokes the specter of a smug, self-regulating, profit-mongering integrated research and living community closer than close to the horrors of Margaret Atwood’s post-apocalyptic MaddAddam trilogy (Sigh.).

Cooper and Waldby have written a fantastic book that deserves to be plumbed for its scholarly riches and theoretical provocation. It is a dense read in one sitting. But its insights frame the substantive chapters in such a way that each is fairly extractable for the purposes of teaching.

### Visceral politics: An oxymoron?


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The title of Elizabeth Wilson’s *Gut Feminism* promises to get down and dirty, to immerse itself in the hidden plumbing and wiring of corporeal being. And yet even this simple description fails to capture the site and substance of Wilson’s fascinations, or why her intervention will prove so difficult. The problem is this: How do we talk about the body’s interiority when our argument chafes at the routine segregation of meat from mind, object from subject and inside from outside? How do we affirm cultural constructionism’s important critique of Cartesianism and the conservative implications of its divisive political legacy when that same critique recuperates its oppositional and hierarchical logic even more forcefully? What can be done when biology becomes an embarrassment, a matter to be eschewed and removed from what we understand as the political? As this review is included in a larger discussion of New Materialism, I should emphasise that what is most valuable in this movement is an appreciation that foundational and historical texts are enduringly contemporary, and further, that what is involved in the designation ‘material’ is very much in question. Although some practitioners have simply reversed the binary, assuming that linguistic and representational concerns have been superseded by a return to real politics and concrete priorities – the vocabulary of this ‘return’ is disappointingly predictable – more sophisticated and provocative work, such as Wilson’s, will leave us wondering. How, for example, is the enteric system invested with, and responsive to, words and images, psychological states, glances and memories?

Wilson’s frame of reference is firmly situated within feminist debate, and it is certainly true that feminism has mounted a sustained engagement with the question of corporeality, insisting that the body has constitutive significance in subject formation. Such analyses remind us of our debt to the body, and that ego identity can only appear as an autonomous ‘presence’ when we negate and devalue the supporting processes of the corporeal. However, this model of production tends to configure process as an aggregation of separate moments, or entities, that are causally interconnected. And this means that in the very gesture that concedes the body’s irreducible importance its identity and operations are circumscribed: the body is understood as the *original* underpinning, the biological stuff that precedes and subtends the coming into being of the subject/ego/cognition. In other words, complexity *arrives* on the scene as cultural, linguistic and symbolic regimes of meaning-making, and as such, the body in its brute and existential immediacy must undergo a makeover that will render it unrecognisable in its original form. Inscribed and mediated by cultural interpretation, biology’s outsider status inevitably appears as threatening in these accounts.

Wilson offers myriad examples of this style of thinking from the feminist canon. Gayle Rubin, for example, whose major contribution appears in two path-finding essays, “The Traffic in Women” (1975) and “Thinking Sex” (1984), is described by no less a figure than Judith Butler as “set[ting] the methodology for feminist theory, then the methodology for lesbian and gay studies” (Butler in Wilson, p. 23). Butler’s grand claim is made in respectful acknowledgement of Rubin’s extraordinary impact on her own work, as well as on the field of feminism and gender studies as a whole. Wilson summarises the political leverage that Rubin’s arguments have made possible. “If we were to think of Rubin’s contributions to feminist theory in axiomatic form, we could say that in 1975 she argued for a disarticulation of biological sex from gender and in 1984 she argued for a disarticulation of the study of gender from the study of sexuality” (Wilson, p. 23). Rubin explains:

This [social and historical constitution of sexuality] does not mean the biological capacities are not *prerequisites* for human sexuality. It does mean that human sexuality is not comprehensible in purely biological terms. Human organisms with human brains are necessary for human cultures, but no examination of the body or its parts can explain the nature and variety of human social systems. The belly’s hunger gives no clues as to the complexities of cuisine. The body, the brain, the genitalia, and the capacity for language are all *necessary* for human sexuality. But they do not determine its content, its experiences, or its institutional forms.

(Rubin in Wilson, p. 24, emphasis added)

Rubin champions Michel Foucault’s work because he “argues that desires are not preexisting biological entities, but rather, that they are constituted in the course of historically specific social practices” (Rubin in Wilson, p. 34). But here is the rub. Rubin must reject biology, or render it static and prescriptive, in the very intervention that hopes to acknowledge its historical lability. As Wilson explains, Rubin’s antibioligism inadvertently returns us to a repressive model of power over sexuality, a situation that then compels feminism to define its liberatory agenda in terms of “the overthrow of juridical-biological power” (p. 34). Wilson’s plea, which seems almost incomprehensible when compared with the established importance of these accepted interventions, is
that we need to consider that biology is inherently labile, naturally cultural – indeed, agential.

The dilemma for Wilson is that feminism’s most important rallying cry since Beauvoir, if not before, has been an exploration of how culture’s operations can be manipulated to change the political landscape and generate outcomes and potentials different from those we inherit. “One is not born, but rather, becomes a woman” (Beauvoir, 1969, p. 273) is surely an early and prescient version of Rubin and Butler’s later arguments, and the authorising signature of feminism as a movement. Given this truisms, Wilson is under no misapprehension that the importance of her intervention will be easily understood. Indeed, in what might appear a rather odd concession, or own-goal, she underlines that without the attempt to remove biological explanation from political argument feminism’s achievements would not have succeeded. “These misreadings and repudiations of biology have had the particular effect of making feminism smart… [they] have been very profitable: they have helped build our theories and affirm our politics… The refutation of bigoted biological theories of gender and sexuality has been, and remains, vital” (p. 30). However, the quandary that Wilson is determined to explore by refusing the routine separation of nature from culture, or matter from ideation, is the question of what, precisely, biology involves?

The riddle that preoccupies Wilson is frustratingly banal and inescapable, despite our every attempt to flee its self-evidence. How should we, indeed, how can we, comprehend the goop and spill of corporeal interiority, the bone, muscle and sinewy connections, the colons, tracts, membranous pouches and bags of provisional containment, the greens, reds, yellows and browns that pulse and ooze just under our skin? How to reconcile the knowledge that a major blow to the head might reveal the liquid seep of selfhood? Wilson delivers a coup de grace to the humanist subject who sees herself as a pilot within the mere container of her body when she asks us to consider if the latter is abruptly different from the former. In all seriousness, we need to consider if a discursive analysis of the body is authored by that same goop and spill, the liquid ooze, electric field, peristaltic jerks and synaptic leaps that seem to utterly confound our very dearest sense of self. How might we approach this internal, corporeal landscape whose apparent mess Wilson describes as thoroughly political, and can we do it without becoming paralysed with fear, or even rage, at the very horror of being … that? Wilson’s skill in this is to wrangle feminist insights and axioms into a different shape without abandoning their wisdoms altogether, and without leaving us entirely disoriented. For example, Wilson is in perfect agreement with Rubin’s call to action in regard to empirical research. Rubin argues, “I would like to see a less dismissive attitude toward empirical work. There is a disturbing trend to treat with condescension or contempt any work that bothers to wrestle with data” (in Wilson, p. 29). Wilson certainly affirms the need for data collection, but asks why this sense of data gathering that has invigorated our understandings of gender and sexuality is commonly restricted to ethnographic, sociological and historical research. Wilson’s concern is that “we have been less enthusiastic about data from the natural sciences. In relation to that kind of data we have been almost uniformly suspicious” (p. 29).

The strength of Gut Feminism lies in Wilson’s ability to investigate evidence from the natural sciences, while at the same time preserving the suspicion and critical perspective that has too quickly dissuaded others. Wilson is a scholar who appreciates the wisdom and value of cultural constructionist imperatives that strive to keep things moving; that hope to promote and explore possibilities for different futures; that wonder about what might be and how to re-present what is. Given this, Wilson’s aim isn’t to privilege biological explanation over cultural and historical ones. As she explains, “[t]his tangled indebtedness to antibiologism isn’t easily solved, especially not by a simple anti-antibiologism (the uncritical embrace of neuroscience, for example). It seems to me that as feminist theory comes to engage more closely with biological data, this must also be a task of historical ones. As she explains, “[t]his tangled indebtedness to antibiologism isn’t easily solved, especially not by a simple anti-antibiologism (the uncritical embrace of neuroscience, for example). It seems to me that as feminist theory comes to engage more closely with biological data, this must also be a task of historical ones. As she explains, “[t]his tangled indebtedness to antibiologism isn’t easily solved, especially not by a simple anti-antibiologism (the uncritical embrace of neuroscience, for example). It seems to me that as feminist theory comes to engage more closely with biological data, this must also be a task of
the political passion and conviction that we tend to
define as properly and only cultural.

For those who are eager to explore this immersive
landscape of intra-active objects and ideas, Wilson
offers several chunky discussions that illustrate how
this methodology that enfolds subject with/in object
might work. She carefully sifts through research
materials whose ‘conclusions’ are as curious as they
are confounding. How, for example, could a placebo,
a little bit of ‘nothing’, disrupt the pharmaceutical
industry’s ability to secure a clear distinction between
the effects of anti-depressant drugs and mere sugges-
tion? What difference does it make to think of the
enteric system as thoroughly psychological, or to ask
if certain organs are transferentially ‘alive’ to each
other’s moods and reasonings? Is the gut already
social, psychological, cognitive, mindful, and not just
because it contains the human biome and its cross-
species ecology? Wilson’s exploration of how cogni-
tion might be operative “below the neck” (p. 172)
takes us into these and other questions that provoke a
string of further investigative puzzles.

Finally, there is a lesson here for feminism, and by
association, for movements whose goals are self-con-
sciously inclusive, whose perspectives are pluralistic
and whose self-declared progressivism is celebrated.
Of course, all such movements understand their benefit in terms of the failures of others to be similarly
generous and open. And yet it is this undeclared censorship, this sometimes murderous need to refuse and deny those who, in their turn, refuse and deny, that interests Wilson. Inasmuch as her argument repudiates anti-biologism’s repudiation of biology, her concern is with the iterative and enduring nature of this will to negativity. Wilson’s message is counter-
intuitive. “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” (p. 6). But perhaps the ethical and political implications of these immersive methodologies are even less manageable than this acknowledgement imagines. The question of ethics, for example, will always remain a question, even when we act, because decisions are contingent and in a sense their repercussion are always out of our direct control. One doesn’t resolve the call to get it right when ‘good ends’, for example, are always and also bad ends, at least for somebody, and sometimes even for the same
person who makes the decision. The recursive tempora-
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