

THE 'VAMPIRES IN THE SACRISTY'

**Feminist body theory and (socio)biological reductionism
into the 21st century**

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**Her suspicion that there existed a bedrock residuum of sex distinction
played second fiddle, nonetheless, to her exasperation with the
social overemphasis on sexual distinction.
(Cynthia Eagle Russett, speaking of Charlotte Perkins Gilman, 1989)**

I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work that has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary institution.

.....

Lynn Roarty

Abstract

What happens when feminist body theory and reductionist theories of biological sex difference are brought together? In this work I take as my starting point the increasing ubiquity of appeals to biology as an explanation for ‘human’ and ‘woman’s’ nature on the one hand, and the reactive and reflexive distancing of biology within feminist body theory on the other, to begin to question the middle ground. I aim to constructively dissent from taking up either of these positions in order to confront the question: what if the reductionists prove to be, even partially, right? In acknowledging that possibility, I am interested in whether/where there is potential for feminist theory to be more relaxed about biologically sex differentiated attributes.

I position myself as a women’s studies scholar taking a walk across the campus to see what evidence is being produced by ‘the opposition’. To place my walk in context, I first briefly explore various feminist approaches to the problem of biological sex differences, and the continuing difficulties surrounding binaries and binary thinking. Next, in the main part of the thesis, I review the historical and contemporary reasoning and claims made within three areas of reductionist science that are aligning at this time, and which have been reproached for promoting a return to a more biologically determinist social environment. I then take a brief excursion off campus to demonstrate the dangerous aspects of these scientific enterprises when their interpretation into popular culture is not carefully monitored. Finally, I return again to my own side of the campus to look at some of the ways feminists have already begun the work of overturning

outworn and contested conventional theories about biology and human nature in conversation with reductionist theory.

Having done this, was it worth the walk? My assessment is that while, in some cases, feminism's defensive antiessentialism is warranted, there is work being undertaken within these reductionist sciences that is less rigid and reactionary than some critical interpretation would suggest. I conclude that there is a certain futility in feminist body theory's oppositional stance to biology, and that its utility is put at risk by a continued investment in one side of a binary. Further, my walk across the campus leads me to believe that, while perhaps not imminent, there is every reason to expect that the scientific pursuit of an unequivocal genetic basis for specific sex differentiated behaviours will succeed. That being so, there are spaces where the insights of both sides might be productively brought together so as to avoid the worst excesses of biological determinism and, at the same time, loosen the grip of binary thinking on approaches to biology and the body.

Table of contents

Abstract.....	iv
Acknowledgements.....	viii
Acronyms	ix
Introduction	1
Part one : Skirting difference	15
1. <i>Embracing nurture : the biosocial politics of difference</i>	16
Introduction.....	16
Metatheoretical approaches	22
Sexual difference feminism – the ‘corporeal turn’	26
Challenging the science	36
Conclusion	60
Part two : The vampires in the sacristy.....	63
2. <i>Genetics, genomes and control : biology’s Holy Grail</i>	64
Introduction.....	64
Background to modern genetics.....	69
The Human Genome Project and its objectives.....	73
Outcomes and benefits.....	76
Controversies.....	82
Ethical, legal & social issues	85
Conclusion	99
3. <i>The bent twig : cognitive sex differences</i>	102
Introduction.....	102
From antiquity	104
The Victorians	107
Modern times	116
Conclusion	134
4. <i>‘Just so’ stories? : sociobiology as persistent paradigm</i>	138
Introduction.....	138
The Biogram	147
Genetic determinism	152
Genotype/phenotype interaction	154
What is a gene?.....	157
Selfish replicators.....	159
Mechanisms of experience – human universals.....	168
Mechanisms of difference – sex differentiated behaviour	176
Conclusion	183

5. <i>'Lunch-chasers and nest-defenders' : vulgar reductionism</i>	187
Introduction	187
<i>"It's a basic model!"</i>	193
The 'gay gene'	197
Testosterone rules	203
Nature versus nurture	209
Conclusion.....	213
Part three : "The organism is predecessor to our theories about it"	217
6. <i>Intersections : feminism and reductionist theory</i>	218
Introduction	218
The critical dialectic	219
The construct dialectic	235
Conclusion.....	242
Conclusion.....	247
Bibliography.....	259

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Acronyms

AAAS	American Association for the Advancement of Science
CEER	Center of Excellence in ELSI Research
CIGHT	Center for the Integration of Genetic Healthcare Technology
CIRGE	Center for Integration of Research on Genetics and Ethics
DNA	deoxyribonucleic acid
DOE	Department of Energy
EEA	environment of evolutionary adaptiveness
EELS	ethical, economic, legal & social issues
ELSI	ethical, legal and social issues
ESS	evolutionarily stable strategy
HGP	Human Genome Project
JHKCC	Johns Hopkins Kimmel Cancer Center
LPCB	The London Project to Cure Blindness
NCI	National Cancer Institute
NHGRI	National Human Genome Research Institute
NH&MRC	National Health & Medical Research Council
NICHD	National Institute of Child Health and Human Development
NIH	National Institutes of Health
NINDS	National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke
OED	Oxford English Dictionary
OHER	Office of Health and Environmental Research
OMIM	Online Mendelian Inheritance in Man
ORNL	Oak Ridge National Laboratory
SAT	Scholastic Aptitude Test

