

Gut Metaphors and Rhetorics of Control

Disability, Access, Equity & Education: Creating Welcoming Communities

Antigonish, NS

August 27, 2019

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Gut talk is quite trendy at the moment. Research on the human gut microbiome (HGM) has generated lots of articles and books promising to help readers take control of their gut health. They invoke a range of metaphors about the nature of the gut microbiome which serve to both evoke awe at its complexity and vastness but also to assure readers that it can be tamed or ‘hacked’ (if not now, then in the ever-nearer future, as science progresses). Claims revolve around a goal of achieving control over a wild other, domesticating it.¹

I can’t help but wonder, however, whether insistence on the possibility of control is the best way for us to relate to the complex world of our gut. The developing understanding of the gut microbiome provides a sharp challenge to both individualism and anthropocentrism, but this challenge is buried under a stream of yogurt ads.

My larger research project concerns working out what relational autonomy and acceptance of vulnerability would be like when it comes to our gut and gut bacteria; what I’ll talk about today is focused on the kind of imagery or metaphor that can help us get there.

Disability Studies, of course, is often suspicious of the insistence on mastery over a body which needs to be “fixed.” I like the language of the “myth of control” from Susan Wendell’s 1996 book *The Rejected Body* –the idea that medicine (including alternative medicine in some cases) assures control over our bodies and that lasting illness or disability is the result of our not having tried the right thing; connected to it is the suggestion that to be at peace with our capacities or limitations is somehow giving up or even being irresponsible (Wendell 1996, 93-114).²

Eli Clare’s 2017 book *Brilliant Imperfection* challenges the *ideology* of cure. Clare describes having had a “vehement anti-cure politics” (Clare 2017, 60), in which cure was to be rejected as contrary to disability pride, and then developing a more nuanced position, as a result of many long discussions with friends, including a friend with cancer (13, 61). This acknowledges desire for cure (as one option among many [Clare 2017, 184]) but resists cure as *ideology*, as assumption that a biomedical fix is what is *always* needed, for *everyone* – to resist that kind of thinking while also recognizing differing relationships to cure (even within the same person). This is the kind of space I want to dwell in.

¹ Examples in Dryden 2016, 6-7.

² Note, though: “I do not imagine that it would be easy to reduce the cultural attachment to the myth of control. Having an unpredictable chronic illness keeps me acutely aware of the strength of my own desire for control of my body. Although for more than ten years I have repeatedly had to give in to the sickness of my body, to surrender to deep fatigue, weakness, and pain, I still resist it every time, because the need to give in is a violation of my autonomy, my ability to plan, to make commitments, to choose. It makes me feel helpless and ashamed. ... I regard the current level of cultural idealization, objectification, quest for perfection, and demand for control of the body as a collective sickness of the soul, an alienation from experience and reality. I believe that people with and without disabilities would benefit from lessening the desire to control one’s body and increasing the desire to live in respectful harmony with it, whatever its weaknesses and failures” (Wendell 1996, 113). Related to the myth of control is what medical sociologist Sarah Nettleton describes the “new paradigm of health,” in which individual responsibility for health is emphasized, including responsibility for our lifestyles insofar as they contribute to health outcomes (Nettleton 1996, 35).

Without *rejecting* control, or cure, but resisting the normalizing imperative to achieve them at all costs, I am interested in our relationship with our gut.

The gut stands out as a site which often evades our control, but one for which lack of control is heavily stigmatized. Cindy LaCom notes that gut disorders are often not talked about even in Disability Studies spaces, noting that people seem less comfortable with her Crohn's symptoms than with her MS; she points out that "Shit is filthy, and it represents contagion in ways that many physical and cognitive disabilities do not" (LaCom 2007). Amy Vidali (2010) argues that while "for sanitary reasons, it's likely impossible (and perhaps unwise) to entirely do away with rhetorics of control related to bowels," we nonetheless need to be attentive to rhetoric surrounding control of the gut, which can often reinforce idealizing expectations and norms.

I don't want to downplay the experiences of people with a wide range of gut trouble or deny their reasons or desires around treatment, management, or cure. (I've been doing some interviews this summer, and will say a little bit about these at the end, depending on how I'm doing for time). But, following Eli Clare's distinction between individual curative desires vs. an overall ideology of cure, can we note ways in which excitement over research into the gut microbiome leads into rhetoric of personal responsibility for normal gut functioning (or at least functioning that passes for normal)³ that risks shaming those who do not succeed, and instead try to imagine alternative rhetorics and different possibilities?

What metaphors associated with the gut microbiome in popular media reinforce problematic expectations and requirements of control and personal responsibility for health?

There is a 2014 article on gut microbiome metaphors written by an interdisciplinary team in France associated with the University of Philosophy of Lyon and a consortium called BIOASTER, funded by the French government as well as private partners (Baty et al 2014, 585), including Danone Research (yes, the yogurt people).⁴ The team's purpose was to document and analyze metaphors that would encourage the public to take an interest in the gut in order to better manage their own health (Baty et al citing Zinken et al 2008, 583). They acknowledge that there may not be a single ideal metaphor, and encourage regularly reviewing and evaluating metaphors as the science progresses and as public expectations develop (Baty et al 584).⁵

They identified different types of metaphors (Baty et al 587-9), discussing the connotations and associations with each.

The first was the gut microbiome as landscape, which is associated with the idea of a journey or something to discover; hearkening to the 1966 *Fantastic Voyage* movie about shrinking down a

³ Kimberly R. Myers discusses concerns around passing vs "coming out" as someone with IBD in Myers 2004.

⁴ As per recent press release here: <http://www.bioaster.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/CP-MOSAIC.pdf>

⁵ "We put forth that there are actually no "bad" metaphors although sometimes they may appear to be more or less suitable. The point is to strengthen the relationship between the metaphor and the consumer's beliefs. In the field of HGM, we speculate that a good metaphor should integrate the cultural background of the given public. The function of HGM metaphors resulting from experts' points of view, should not be reduced to a mere translation of scientific truth but rather used to help consumers accept novel insights in the field of Gut Health, which fit with how they picture their own internal microbial symbiont. ... We conclude that an ideal metaphor for the HGM might not exist. We also conclude that there is a need to routinely evaluate metaphors related to the HGM in order to better adapt the available data mined from basic research to conscious and unconscious public expectations." (Baty et al 584).

submarine and traveling through the body.⁶ It also brings up notions of equity and justice insofar as it is connected with a landscape we might share as a common good (Baty et al 587).

Meanwhile, the gut microbiome as organ – in the sense of being a “second stock of genes” or “second brain” can lead us to ask about mutualism and whether we are “chimeras” (Baty et al 587). Baty and his team also link this metaphor – in the form of “gut microflora” – to the idea of a garden (“our internal garden”), which I will come back to later in more detail.

The gut microbiome as portrait reflects the idea of another self, which suggests “much more a partner to discover and to respect rather than a potentially disobedient community to conquer and enslave” (Baty et al 588), as well as the idea of a distinctive fingerprint or signature (Baty et al 589).⁷

With each group, they explore how that framing might lead us to rethink our sense of our human boundaries and apparent dominance in the world. Cool! But, the team’s stated goal was to find a metaphor that would allow policy makers and health professionals to effectively communicate with the public so that individuals can learn how to properly modulate their gut microbiome and therefore assume personal responsibility for their health (Baty et al 590). There is a tension between rethinking human dominance and mandating personal responsibility and control over one’s gut.⁸

Despite (or maybe because of) this tension, I think the collection itself is helpful to think with, both in terms of what they do with the metaphors and what we *could* do with them. I’ll look at a couple that they mention: the idea of partners/friends, and at the gut garden.

Partners/Friends:

In addition to the seeing the gut as “alter ego, a partner or a subcontractor” (Baty et al 590), Baty et al invoke the language of friends, noting that in the current discourse discouraging overuse of antibiotics, the microbiome is “presented as a vast community of friendly bacteria” (Baty et al 591). These connote very different power relations and expectations. After all, we don’t really give our friends instructions or demands the way we might a subcontractor; we do not master our friends. We expect our friends to have their own agency, their own purposes.⁹

We might think of service animals.¹⁰ In his book, *The Two in One: Walking with Smokie, Walking with Blindness*, Rod Michalko describes his relationship with his guide dog, Smokie: “Smokie and I do not merely inhabit a common natural and social world; we depend upon one another for our existence,

⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fantastic_Voyage

⁷ They also suggest a combination type, with the metaphor of gut microbiome as a *symbolic* portrait, which would allow the painting (the microbiome itself) to mix with the symbolic landscape (human), thus highlighting the importance of the observer (Baty et al 589).

⁸ This is evident for example in their discussion of obesity, where they suggest that a shift from a landscape model of the HGM to the portrayal of HGM as portrait and an “alter ego, a partner or a subcontractor” could help; they suggest that the landscape model “deprives individuals from authority” but the other would provide “a way to keep one’s hand in diet adjustments” (Baty et al 590). It is similar to the discussion of autonomy and the gut microbiome in a paper by Jonathan Beever and Nicolae Morar, in which they worry that a relational understanding of health has allowed obese people to shirk their responsibility for their health (and made doctors afraid to bring it up), and that a better understanding of how we can affect our gut bacteria will allow them again to take up their personal responsibility (Beever and Morar, 2016, 40-41).

⁹ (Perhaps, recalling Aristotle’s discussion of friendship, these are “friends of utility”?)

¹⁰ A fuller discussion is in Dryden 2016, 3-4.

and together we construct and re-construct the world. Smokie and I are, almost literally, extensions of each other” (Michalko 1999, 5).¹¹

But dogs are macro-level species (as are my cats), and so I can easily *feel* myself in relation with them, affectively. It seems harder to feel ourselves in *relation with* gut bacteria on an affective level. We can’t see them and we certainly can’t pet them. (Though there are a number of companies providing data on the makeup of our gut bacteria, and the demand for this seems to speak to the desire to see them!) But we might explore metaphors that allow us to situate ourselves in non-hierarchical relation with them. Michalko’s language of a two-in-one points to a multiplicity within the self that complicates neat ideas of control (and the “individual” of “individual responsibility”). This would complicate seeing the microbiome in terms of property.

Also, living with our gut bacteria can sometimes produce painful, unpleasant, and debilitating experiences. A line from Donna Haraway’s *Companion Species Manifesto* seems particularly apt: “Co-habiting does not mean fuzzy and touchy-feely. Companion species are not companionate mates ready for early twentieth-century Greenwich Village anarchist discussions. Relationship is multiform, at stake, unfinished, consequential” (Haraway 2003, 30).

Gardens

Another idea that Baty et al discuss is the gut as garden, which they relate to the idea of gut as organ. They ultimately think it’s inadequate, but it is really popular. It gets used a lot in consumer marketing, trying to appeal to a desire for the natural and the organic – just google “gut garden” and a pile of stuff comes up. There is a premium supplement company, My Gut Garden.¹² As of last summer, on the landing page of their website was an image of a white woman deeply inhaling a sunflower with her eyes closed. She is wearing a shirt with feather images. The whole picture has a soft, wholesome glow. The motto across this picture is “Nourish your inner garden.”¹³ A bit further down a tagline reads “Vibrant health begins in the gut,” and headers suggest these supplements will help you “Lose Weight,” “Restore Vitality,” and “Improve Mood.” These are big promises!¹⁴

A garden sounds like a lovely image – who doesn’t like a garden? – but what kind of image or schema are we really working with?¹⁵ What kind of garden do we have in mind? An English garden,

¹¹ Later in the book, he goes on to say: “My self is now *our* self. Smokie’s self too is *our* self. We are ‘at home together,’ which means that we are continually making a home for our self” (Michalko 1999, 91). Sunaura Taylor’s *Beasts of Burden* also encourages an examination of our relations with other species: in the final chapter, she discusses a relationship with a service dog who has in turn become disabled as well – they provide mutual care to each other.

¹² Mission statement on their “About” page: “Gut Garden is dedicated to helping our customers achieve optimal digestive and immune health by bringing to market premium research-based intestinal health supplements. We will operate with complete truthfulness and transparency in regards to materials, quantities, label claims and quality manufacturing processes (GMP). Our products are made using only ultra-pure source ingredients that provide a direct health benefit to the consumer – we never use preservatives, fillers, colorings, or flavorings. We are determined to respond effectively to rapid and complex changes in health care, and we will be an excellent community citizen - embodying an organization that does the right thing every day to improve the health and well-being of our customers.”

¹³ mygutgarden.com landing page.

¹⁴ “Restore Vitality” is explained as “Bacteria that feast on resistant starch produce short-chain fatty acids that cool inflammation and repair the intestinal wall” – but the invocation of “vitality” suggests the kind of language of 19th and early 20th century elixirs).

¹⁵ Think of prototype effects here.

charmingly overrun and seemingly ‘natural’¹⁶? A French garden? A Japanese garden? The sites describing our gut as a garden are also offering ways of controlling or tending said garden, with the assumption that it is *ours*. Remember household gardens can involve insecticides, pesticides, carefully bred and domesticated seeds, etc.

Having a garden is still, in most cases, having and cultivating a piece of **property**, over which I expect to exert **control**. (There are also, of course community gardens! It would be interesting to think through these as a gut metaphor – but I do not think that is what sites like “My Gut Garden” are selling).¹⁷

Baty et al cite Hub Zwart, who encourages us to see ourselves as “vessels, floating through a microbial web of life” (Zwart 2010, 48). The team however do not describe this as a prod for us to in fact rethink our place in the world, but rather as a challenge for us to overcome, so that we see “Nature and the Creation” not as “superior authorities but rather as things that Man could seize,” which they connect to “the idea of progress” and “the notion of value.” (Baty et al 2014, 588). This could just be a description of a historical progression, but the discussion of biovalue elsewhere in the article (and the purposes of BIOASTER) seem to display an endorsement of this way of thinking. The model followed is to make something into property, and then to control it. (If it’s not our property, we can’t control it. So it must be made into property).

What happens if we avoid the mode of transforming relations into property?¹⁸ What metaphors and images might be possible? I really like Anna Tsing’s work on matsutake mushrooms. Matsutake grow in disturbed landscapes and resist being cultivated. I’ll share a passage from her 2012 essay “Unruly Edges”:

...Domestication tends to be imagined as a hard line: You are either in the human fold or you are out in the wild. Because this domestication stems from an ideological commitment to human mastery, it supports the most outrageous fantasies of domestic control, on the one hand, and wild species self-making, on the other. ... Yet despite these extreme efforts, most species on both sides of the line—including humans—live in complex relations of dependency and interdependence. Attention to this diversity can be the beginning of an appreciation of interspecies species being (Tsing 2012, 144).

¹⁶ http://www.theenglishgarden.co.uk/expert-advice/design-solutions/design_the_english_landscape_garden_/ Note language of nature as a garden and the idea that being master of garden → master of nature.

¹⁷ There is an interesting passage in the Baty et al article, in the section on seeing the gut as organ. They connect the “internal garden” to Eden and conceptions of humans at the center of the world, noting that this anthropocentric position has been challenged by the “narcissistic insults” of “the Copernican revolution, confronting Mankind with the Universe, the Darwinian revolution, confronting Mankind with Evolution and the Psychoanalytical revolution, confronting Mankind with Mental Forces. There is a chance that the new paradigm of HGM might represent the fourth revolution, confronting Mankind with Microbes (Zwart 2012).” (Baty et al 2014, 588)

¹⁸ Jason Moore describes this framework as the “Capitalocene”, in which we conceive of ourselves as separate from nature and treat nature solely as something to be appropriated, extracted, used as dumping ground, according to the law of “Cheap Nature” (Making Kin 11-12; Moore 2016, 11).¹⁸ Meanwhile, Kim TallBear criticizes the mode in which we make relations, human and non-human, into things (Making Kin 161-2) and thus transform them into property, which must be hoarded and protected.

I am open to discussion of how much control we actually *do* expect to have while gardening – I am a horrible gardener, having lived most of my life in apartments – but I also wonder what other models there may be for living alongside our gut, other than hacking, taming, domesticating, or anthropomorphizing.

Interspecies relationship

Elsewhere on the same page Tsing notes, “Human nature is an interspecies relationship” (Tsing 2012, 144), and in her 2015 book, she describes being good neighbours, where neighbourliness involves “social relations across differences of vitality and species, living and dead, essential to good living” (Tsing 2015, 279). The lessons from Rod Michalko and Smokie apply here too. Can we use this to think differently, and cultivate (ha ha) new metaphors?

In her book, she describes someone deliberately disturbing a landscape in order to encourage matsutake growth: “The forest he hoped for would have to grow itself. But he wanted to help it along by creating a certain kind of mess: a mess that would advantage pine” (Tsing 2015, 151). Creating a ‘certain kind of mess’ is not establishing control, but creating certain possibilities.¹⁹

The messiness can mean that there is also discomfort and pain. But pain can mean different things, and can take on different qualities depending on our conception of it (Patsavas 2014).

Images and examples of interspecies living and the open-ended nature of that collaboration shifts us away from an expectation of individuals ultimately “fixing” their gut. They resist impositions of an either/or hierarchy of mastery or property.

The metaphors we use might also affect our responses. A metaphor that implies the idea of my individual gut as my individual property or possession, over which I have responsibility, provokes responses such as the need for individual treatment, an individual diet plan, and so forth. A metaphor that focuses on deep enmeshment and relation might draw forth responses such as better access to accessible and clean washrooms, shared community responsibility around food availability and quality, shared awareness about the need for patience and understanding in the face of interruptions, unexpected detours, and the messiness of life with an unruly gut.

Closing Thoughts

So, that was my proper conclusion, based on work I’ve been doing with theoretical and scholarly sources. I wanted to add a little bit more based on work I’ve done this summer with a pilot project of interviewing people who self-identified as having “gut issues” (framed broadly in order to get a wide range of folks and experiences!). I am still working through transcription and analysis, but I wanted to share a couple initial thoughts.

¹⁹ Mess comes up as well in Alexis Shotwell’s book *Against Purity*: she writes: “We should understand eating as illuminating our bodies as mere way stations in complex, entwined systems. The eating and excreting body is always entangled, enmeshed, a mess. Part of the mess that allows us to live is our intense coproduction with constitutive others – the viruses and bacteria that live with and in our bodies” (Shotwell 2016, 114). What happens if we embrace that mess and acknowledge the relation of co-production? Meanwhile Joseph Dumit gives the following instruction in the introduction to *Tactical Biopolitics: Art, Activism, and Technoscience*: “Microbiopolitical tactic: Never think you know all of the species involved in a decision. Corollary: Never think you speak for all of yourself.” (Dumit 2008, xii). What would happen if we practiced bearing that in mind, if we worked toward that habit?

First, I had much more interest than I anticipated, and I am so grateful to those who were willing to share their experiences with me. As a philosopher, I don't usually get to talk to others during the research process.

Second, when asked about the kinds of metaphors or images that they had for their relation to their guts, many described it in terms of an enemy or a monster. Some talked about *wanting* to make it into more of a friend, and some had achieved this (and one talks about being united with her gut against the *world*); but I don't think anyone took the same path in getting there. I'm looking forward to further reviewing the data for whether these perceptions link back to the fear or embrace of vulnerability. I'm also looking forward to continuing this work, and please be in touch if you want to talk guts.

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