

Jan-2015

Book Review: Governing the Female Body: Gender, Health, and Networks of Power

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Recommended Citation

Seethaler, Ina Christiane (2015). Book Review: Governing the Female Body: Gender, Health, and Networks of Power. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 16(2), 407-408.

Available at: <http://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol16/iss2/29>

Governing the Female Body: Gender, Health, and Networks of Power. 2010.

Edited by Lori Reed and Paula Saukko. Albany: SUNY Press; 310 pages (including index);
Paperback (\$24.95). ISBN 978-1-4384-2952-6

Reviewed by Ina Christiane Seethaler¹

Within the last fifteen years, studies on the female body and medicine have challenged existing assumptions about women's health. Feminist critics have contested that women's issues, bodies, and knowledge have been neglected in medical research. *Governing the Female Body* adds to the work that has been done in this field by discussing, often less theoretically, new discourses that have emerged recently in a wide range of areas related to women's bodies and the health sciences. The collection offers valuable insight into new modes of communication especially the Internet, advances in medical technologies, and the dynamics of advocacy and interest groups. The essays in *Governing the Female Body* investigate convincingly the problems as well as possibilities inherent in these new developments. Its uniqueness and timeliness make this collection an essential contribution to a quickly changing field.

In the introduction to *Governing the Female Body*, editors Lori Reed and Paula Saukko state the goal of the volume as the attempt to “disentangle and critically analyze the multidimensional networks of power . . . that traverse the female body and through which the female body traverses” (3-4). The essays in the edition reach this goal by exploring the female body, health, sexuality, family, and politics from a poststructuralist feminist standpoint. The contributors clarify the connections between methods of governing bodies and political governance and highlight discourses which have formed female bodies and selves. The essays consist of case studies taken from various fields related to women's health. Making use of the concept of intersectionality, these case studies demonstrate convincingly how gender, race, class, sexuality, and other markers of identity influence research and politics related to women's health. The collection's greatest accomplishment constitutes its presentation and discussion of new discourses and current developments surrounding gender and health practices which have not yet received much attention, for example, in the field of reproductive medicine, cancer research, and drug development. At the basis of every essay lies the important act of questioning assumptions about what is considered pathological in terms of gender, women's bodies, motherhood, and genetics.

The editors helpfully divided *Governing the Female Body* into four parts, which makes it easy for the reader to realize meaningful connections between the issues discussed. The essays in the first section on “mediated self-health” discuss how women's and men's lifestyle magazines portray relationships and selfhood differently, look at new genetic tests and internet support groups, and analyze how computer addiction is romanticized with men but pathologized with women and children.

The second section on “Privatization and the Body Proper-ty” demonstrates how economic interests exert power over the female body. The authors of these essays look specifically at the corporatization of the breast cancer movement, the combination of marketing campaigns and menstruation, and the development of antidepressants. Following a new current

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of interest and research in transnationalism, especially in the field of Women's Studies, the third part in *Governing the Female Body*, "Transnational Body Politics," offers new insight into the testing of "the pill" on women in Puerto Rico, explores participatory soap operas which educate their audience about women's health, and criticizes the exoticization of Latinas in popular culture.

Finally, the fourth section entitled "Science, Nature and Gender" brings into perspective issues such as in-vitro fertilization, lesbian sadomasochism, and genomics. This immense diversity of topics enables the reader to gain access to and understanding of some of the most current research topics concerning women's health. In terms of scope, this collection demonstrates no lack. While the essays on Hollywood representations of Latinas and on lesbian sadomasochism might seem to fit this collection with a focus on women's health only tangentially, what helps the reader draw connections between all the issues presented is the fact that all essays and arguments are united in their reference to issues of self-empowerment and politics. Furthermore it is highly educational for the reader to see how the same issues are used and discussed differently in diverse contexts.

Governing the Female Body follows a strong critical framework. Building on Foucault's three-dimensional theory about "governance" and power, the individual essays look at the connections between gender, power, and the body. Critical and theoretical concepts are explained in such a way that someone new to academic discourse will be able to follow the application of Foucault's and other concepts. Reed and Saukko's introduction to the volume proves especially helpful to readers in its exposition of Foucault's theory and its emphasis on how the "personal is political," a basic claim of all the essays in the collection. Furthermore, individual authors make a point of explaining scientific, medical and academic terminology appropriately and sufficiently.

Overall, the essays in this collection are well-written and highly enlightening. *Governing the Female Body* offers instructive material especially for higher-level undergraduate courses as well as graduate students and anyone pursuing advanced research on women's health. The complexity of the issues and the theoretical framework might make some of the claims harder to grasp for new college students unfamiliar with the vocabulary of critical and especially feminist discourse. Besides the Women and Gender Studies classroom, this collection can be recommended for use in classes in the humanities, the social sciences, and especially the health sciences. At the price of \$24.95, *Governing the Female Body* would make an informative and affordable core class text that is inclusive, diverse, and complete. Apart from its appropriateness for the college classroom, this collection should be read by anyone interested in or specifically studying the female body. The essays in this volume certainly achieve the editors' goal of evoking a process of rethinking contemporary discourse on women and health. By providing innovative insight into often neglected territory and because of its remarkable scope, *Governing the Female Body* accomplishes what it sets out to do and constitutes an overall very strong collection.