



**Lori Reed, Paula Saukko, eds..** *Governing the Female Body: Gender, Health, and Networks of Power*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010. vi + 310 pp. \$24.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-4384-2952-6.



**Reviewed by** Meredith Nash

**Published on** H-Histsex (May, 2011)

**Commissioned by** Timothy W. Jones (University of South Wales, & La Trobe University)

*Governing the Female Body* builds on a body of existing feminist literature that examines the various dimensions of governing women's bodies through health discourses, drawing broadly on the work of Michel Foucault. The editors and contributors to this collection challenge the tendency to exclusively evaluate power negatively, exposing instead its contradictory nature and its role in shaping gendered subjects. As the editors suggest, "governance not only refers to modifying individuals to fit institutional agendas, but also to an active practice of self-governance" (p. 7). Indeed, Foucault's body of work here has important implications for feminist explorations of bodies, knowledge, power, and subjectivity. Each chapter of the book critically examines "an existing discourse and practice" through the lens of issues ranging from infertility and depression to breast cancer, menstruation, and pregnancy (p. 7). Of the fifteen contributors to this volume, nine are scholars of media and communication studies, with a smattering of contributions from scholars of gender and sociology.

This book brings together an important range of contemporary topics and examines an understanding of women's bodies, governmentality, and power through different social processes and concepts with relevant examples. The first section of the book focuses on what the editors refer to as "mediated self-health" in which women configure selfhood via their negotiations between personal "freedom" and "health" in a neoliberal sociopolitical and economic context that both promotes and constrains their "choices." The three chapters in this section examine the role of women's magazines, online health support groups, and moral panics about women and Internet addiction in policing femininity and pathologizing women's bodies. The second section examines the economic regulation of women's "healthy" bodies through case studies of moments when women's "private" body parts and health issues have cultural significance: "pink ribbon" breast cancer campaigns, pharmaceutical products that regulate menstruation, and the marketing of antidepressants. These three chapters focus on the oscillation between

seizing control and being in control when it comes to the commodification of health. The third section addresses the governing of women's bodies politically with a focus on what the editors refer to as "transnational inequalities" (p. 12). These chapters illustrate that the way we think and talk about women's bodies and health is also part of a system of racial and ethnic domination. The essays in this section examine discourses surrounding the Pill and the politics of fertility of women of Puerto Rican origin, mass media public health campaigns used for governing reproductive health globally, and the production of normalizing "public" discourses surrounding Latina femininity and sexuality and how this is implicated in the pathologization of Latina bodies in public health policy. The final section of the book problematizes discourses of biological "normality" and the scientific governing of women's bodies via in vitro fertilization (IVF), the feminist "sex wars," and the policing of genetic sex.

One of the strongest aspects of this book is its demonstration that women's bodies are subject to powerful discourses within the theaters of health and medicine in institutional settings as well as in everyday life. The contributors make clear that women are often controlled by a system of reward and punishment by health policymakers and this is robustly integrated throughout the volume. This book highlights how female selves are governed socially, economically, politically, culturally, and biologically. This volume acknowledges the different needs of different women and offers a multi-voiced debate on the social implications of practices around health for women and the issue of "choice."

One of the main weaknesses of the book is that many of the key feminist theoretical challenges to Foucauldian frameworks are not usefully demarcated nor is it clear why the editors have chosen to rely heavily on Foucault when decades of feminist scholarship have usefully canvassed the possibilities and pitfalls of Foucault's work for

feminism. While this does not necessarily mean that the problematic nature of Foucault's work for feminists necessarily negates this conceptual framework, there are a number of feminist strategies available for exploring the limits and possibilities associated with the corporeal character of governmentality that this volume does not acknowledge. I was particularly frustrated that references to "embodiment" appear throughout the book without much engagement with what this means for "feminists" or how Foucault dealt with bodies and materiality. Moreover, I was surprised to see chapters on menstruation and pregnancy that do not cite key feminist scholarship in these areas. Overall, this book is a good introduction to the intersections of gender, health, and power with a clear layout, highly accessible style, and real-life examples. It is not clear to me, however, what it is about this book that is particularly "feminist" (as it is marketed as a women's studies volume) other than the fact that it focuses on women. This volume will be less useful for women's and gender studies scholars who might find this to be a bit light theoretically. This book will be of interest, however, to scholars of media and communications and science and technology studies, fields that are more in concert with the contributors to the volume.

(p. 7)&#160;

examines

-

-

.

i

s

-

of the book focuses on  
articles

e  
-  
s  
would  
which is

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-histsex>

**Citation:** Meredith Nash. Review of Reed, Lori; Saukko, Paula, eds. *Governing the Female Body: Gender, Health, and Networks of Power*. H-Histsex, H-Net Reviews. May, 2011.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=31278>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.