Feminist Bioethics: At the Center, on the Margins edited by Jackie Leach Scully, Laurel E. Baldwin-Ragaven, and Petya Fitzpatrick
Private Bodies, Public Texts: Race, Gender, and a Cultural Bioethics by Karla F. C. Holloway

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corporating social, cultural, environmental, and biological factors in their full dynamism and contexts—as the research ideal. Keller argues for changing the question from one seeking to quantify the contribution of nature to human development—what is determined?—to one assessing the range of plasticity—how much can we change? Keller sees hope in new biological fields such as epigenetics, systems biology, and studies of phenotypic plasticity, which in her view suggest that the postgenomic life sciences are trending toward an appreciation of complexity. It remains to be seen whether the turn away from genetic determinism and toward plasticity celebrated by these fields is a truly transformative one, offering resources sufficient to instigate the profound shift in research questions and emphasis that Keller envisions.

Both of these new books represent mature and very welcome additions to the feminist science studies literature. In mapping the landscape of determinism in the contemporary brain and genetic sciences, Jordan-Young and Keller have produced invaluable topologies of its faults, fissures, and intransigencies, which will help gender scholars find sure footing as we navigate and work to refigure the presently polarized nature-nurture debates.


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These two recent publications make critical interventions into the bedrock of mainstream bioethics. While Feminist Bioethics: At the Center, on the Margins and Private Bodies, Public Texts employ different methodologies, they share a common destination. Each targets the hegemony of principalism in bioethical thinking and the impartial, universal subject that such reasoning assumes.

The collection Feminist Bioethics recounts and evaluates the impact of feminist bioethics on traditional bioethics. Feminist bioethics, the editors argue, is at a “defining point in its 20-year history” (3) as it navigates the tenuous terrain between incorporation into mainstream bioethics and iso-
lation as a marginal interlocutor. Analyzing this ambiguous positioning of feminist bioethics, the editors are cautiously celebratory, remarking that “we as feminist bioethicists experience a mixture of pride in how far we have come, concern about what we have not yet achieved, and fear about what we might be turning into” (xi).

The volume is divided into four sections, each framed by an introductory essay by the editors. The first section offers a survey of what feminist bioethics has accomplished. Questions concerning the field’s theories are addressed in the second section. The third part focuses on methodological issues. Finally, the fourth section engages issues of ethnic, racial, and disability differences.

This collection successfully demonstrates that feminist bioethics has pushed bioethical questions beyond the doctor-patient relationship, and the articles in this volume serve as evidence of the influence feminist bioethics has had on mainstream bioethics. For example, Christoph Rehmann-Sutter’s essay examines how feminist bioethicists have changed the ethical discourse concerning prenatal genetic diagnosis. Several essays emphasize how feminist interventions into bioethics have replaced what Catriona Mackenzie calls the “maximal choice” (71) conception of freedom with a relational model of autonomy that considers the complex situatedness of moral subjects.

While Feminist Bioethics documents the accomplishments of this once-marginal discipline, the question remains, what is feminist bioethics? The collection appears to be organized around formulating an answer to this question. Given the internal plurality of feminist bioethics—a diversity to which the volume itself attests—it may be difficult to discern what makes bioethics feminist. Although at times the editorial introductions waver in their confidence in a common ground for feminist bioethics, Jackie Leach Scully concludes in “Reassessment and Renewal” that the field contains an “irreducible minimum” (296), even though its representatives may be united only in their rejection of traditional approaches to bioethical theory and practice.

In many ways, the collection presents itself as a response to Richard Twine’s essay “Broadening the Feminism in Feminist Bioethics,” which appears in the first section. Twine argues that feminist bioethics neglects the plurality of feminisms, especially the postmodern and ecofeminist branches. While the editors strive to cover a diversity of topics, Twine’s concern about the apparent homogeneity of feminist bioethical theory and method is not fully addressed; ecofeminist and postmodern approaches to bioethics are not sufficiently represented in Feminist Bioethics, and consequently, the anthropocentrism of the “bios” in bioethics is un-
questioned, as Twine’s argument predicts. The editors have a clear preference for bioethics based in care ethics, which may be understandable given that this is the kind of feminism that has achieved the most traction in mainstream bioethics. Yet this is precisely Twine’s concern: that in striving to engage the center of bioethics, feminist bioethicists manage “which ‘feminism’ and what ‘bioethics’ are being deployed” (46) rather than reconceptualizing the center space itself. No volume on feminist bioethics would be complete without engaging the work of Margrit Shildrick, whose work in postmodern feminist bioethics is fundamental to the field. The fact that Twine is the only author to give her mention provides evidence for his claims.

Private Bodies, Public Texts offers a legal and literary analysis of bioethical narratives. A text in what author Karla F. C. Holloway calls “cultural ethics” (xv), this is an interdisciplinary work that distances itself from traditional ethical and legal approaches to bioethics. Holloway identifies three distinguishing features of cultural ethics: First, it “insists on cultural complexity as the origin of subjectivity” (xv). Second, it begins from the assumption that ethical inquiry is socially, culturally, and historically located. Finally, cultural ethics understands narratives as constitutive of, rather than as abstractions from, disciplinary knowledge.

The book is divided into four essays—on reproduction, clinical trials, genomics, and death and dying. Through the lens of cultural bioethics, these diverse topics intersect at issues of identity, specifically race and gender. The main argument of the book is that individuals marked by racial and gender differences have a “compromised relationship to privacy” (9). According to Holloway, women and black Americans are not afforded the rights to autonomy and privacy that are so highly regarded in bioethics. This analysis culminates in the final chapter on death and dying, which juxtaposes public responses to landmark right-to-die cases that involved end-of-life decisions for white women with the deaths of black patients on the LifeCare floor in New Orleans’s Memorial Medical Hospital in the wake of Hurricane Katrina.

The strength of Private Bodies, Public Texts is that it effectively demonstrates how the moral subject of bioethics is universal and impartial only insofar as it assumes the perspective of white, middle-class men. The differences that race and gender make are the starting point for Holloway’s textual analysis. Her work eschews the epistemological work central to Feminist Bioethics and enacts an analysis that shows not just that race and gender permeate ethical, legal, and literary narratives of bioethical issues but also how they do so. This performative approach may appeal to readers of Signs because it enables a nuanced understanding of how identity mat-
ters. At the same time, however, the work may not receive as much attention from scholars in mainstream bioethics, who will likely not accept the basic assumptions of *Private Bodies, Public Texts*.

While Holloway introduces *Private Bodies, Public Texts* as a work in cultural ethics, readers will be left wondering exactly what cultural ethics is and how it is situated in relationship to mainstream bioethics. Cultural ethics is discussed only briefly in the introduction and final pages of the text, and the only definition offered is a description of what it is not. Holloway is clear that her intention is not to offer a framework for making bioethical decisions. At the same time, her readers—especially bioethicists—may be left wondering how cultural ethics implicates bioethical reasoning. It is unclear what precisely Holloway’s narrative analysis of identity means for mainstream bioethics.

Moreover, from the descriptions that Holloway offers of cultural bioethics, it seems similar to feminist bioethics in method and objective. Because of these similarities and because of the book’s focus on gender identity, Holloway’s lack of engagement with feminist bioethics throughout the text is notable. Twine’s concern that feminist bioethics self-manages may help explain this absence. It is possible that in seeking to engage mainstream bioethics, feminist bioethicists have replicated an implicit focus on whiteness that Holloway finds problematic in bioethics.

Both *Feminist Bioethics* and *Private Bodies, Public Texts* will be of interest to those seeking alternatives to mainstream bioethics. They both provide a solid introduction to and survey of the criticisms of the assumptions made in bioethical theory and practice. The texts complement one another well. *Feminist Bioethics* will appeal more to readers interested in theory, while *Private Bodies, Public Texts* will be more useful for scholars considering how race matters in contemporary bioethics.