Books Forum: Breast Cancer Genetics and the Practice of Health

Javier Lezaun (Reviews Editor)

Department of Law, Jurisprudence & Social Thought, Amherst College, 74 College Street,
Amherst, MA 01002, USA

E-mail: jlezaun@amherst.edu

The discovery more than a decade ago of genetic mutations linked to inherited breast and ovarian cancer heralded profound changes in medical research and health care. The isolation of the two genes where these mutations were located—the famous BRCA1 and BRCA2—not only would allow the early diagnosis of individuals at high risk of familial cancer; it could also, many thought, help unravel the secrets of other forms of breast cancer. The identification of such a clear link between genes and cancer seemed to usher us into an age of ‘genetic medicine’—an era of early and individualized diagnosis of genetic predispositions to disease.

The last ten years have provided plenty of evidence of the complexities involved with translating the early discoveries into effective medical options, and of the multiple and subtle transformations that new genetic knowledge has introduced to the politics of health. The trajectories of change have been far from linear, not least because the meanings of the fundamental categories at stake—‘patienthood’, ‘family’, ‘breast cancer’, ‘genes’—have been altered in the process. New actors and collectives have populated the new spaces of prevention and care made possible by genetic testing.

This issue of ‘Books forum’ reviews two recent books by Sahra Gibbon and Shobita Parthasarathy on the contemporary politics of breast cancer genetics. Each examines sites and practices central to breast cancer research and care in the UK and the US—from the categorization of risk categories and the development of diagnostic technologies, to the evolving role of families, the state and breast cancer advocacy in shaping the nature of medical provision. Along with a review of their books by Karen-Sue Taussig, we include an interview with the two authors.