Editorial

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This issue of *BioSocieties* addresses a range of key issues in the contemporary politics of the life sciences. A lecture by Filippa Lentzos succinctly and provocatively outlines the state of the relations between the life sciences and biosecurity. In her article on the emerging ‘epigenetic biopolitics’ of environmental chemicals, Becky Mansfield explores the ways in which epigenetics is recasting the relation between race and the environment. To the extent that chemicals in the food chain that adversely affect foetal development are differentially consumed by different racial or ethnic groups, advice from regulatory agencies bears differently upon them, as indeed do the consequences of maternal food choices on their children – producing what Mansfield terms ‘embodied race’. In another analysis of the politics of reproduction, based on a study in Finland, Mianna Meskus explores the consequences of prenatal testing for what she terms ‘personalised ethics’, in which ‘the ethics of prenatal testing has transformed from a profession-centred code of conduct into a personal issue of pregnant women’ in a Nordic welfare state setting. She finds that women must act as what Rapp (1999) called ‘moral pioneers’ – they seek to generate novel moral worlds to deal with their new burden of choice-making in these reproductive contexts.

In her revealing study of the use of HIV dating Websites by women living with HIV, Fadhila Mazanderani explores the new ethics of intimacy arising among those living with HIV, and how those so affected organise their sexual and romantic relationships in the light of dilemmas about disclosure of their HIV-positive status. She argues that the disclosure of an HIV-positive status and the selection of HIV-positive partners are ‘key mechanisms for preventing the spread of the virus while enabling people ‘living with HIV’ to form intimate relations’ – practices that she refers to as ‘viral-sociality’ and in which issues of ‘private’ ethics are constantly intertwined with the public morality of HIV-related criminal prosecution.

Another two articles in this issue continue the journal’s engagement with contemporary neuroscience. One of the key dimensions of controversy, as neuroscience intersects with psychiatry, concerns the status of psychiatry’s diagnostic categories. Nowhere is this more acute than in relation to autism. In his article ‘What is this thing called autism?’, Berend Verhoeff suggests that while the common belief is that the clinical category of autism has a unifying essence, grounded in the idea that it is a *natural kind*, such a view is challenged by the sheer diversity of symptoms, traits and cognitive profiles of those so diagnosed. Developing a theme common to much critical work on contemporary neuroscience, Verhoeff concludes that autism is a thoroughly cultural category, but that beliefs about its biological basis obscure the wider social, cultural and psychological issues that constitute it.

This approach is very different from that which characterizes what has come to be termed ‘cultural neuroscience’. In their article ‘How cultural is “cultural neuroscience”?’, Ruth

Denkhaus and Mathias Bös explore this new research paradigm, suggesting that there is work to be done if it is to move beyond contemporary cultural clichés and to succeed in its ambition to make neuroscience genuinely engage with cultural difference and diversity. Locating many of these weaknesses within the discipline of cultural psychology from which this work largely derives, the authors conclude with some propositions towards a ‘truly cultural neuroscience’ that might avoid ‘the popular pitfalls of essentialism and reductionism’.

As we added our ‘Thinking on the Edge’ section, we have received a number of essays seeking to push the boundaries of current theory and thought. In this issue, Nikolas Rose ponders ‘democracy’ and its changing relation to citizenship and the life sciences. We end this issue with an ambitious review by Franklin Ginn of political scientist Jane Bennet’s *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. The book contributes to a controversy over the ontological foundations of science studies by examining the political implications of a new materialism, which acknowledges the agency of things. In his review, Ginn calls into question whether any such metaphysical account can provide the normative orientation sought by Bennet. Regular readers will note the absence of our usual multiple review Books Forum in this issue. We regret this, but the difficulty of persuading potential authors to take the time to engage in detail with key works in their discipline may reveal something about the publication pressures to which all academics are subject, and the priorities that these inevitably enforce. That being said, on behalf of our readers, we thank all those who have contributed to our books forums in the past, and hope even more will do so in future.

Reference

Rapp, R. (1999) *Testing Women/Testing the Fetus: The Social Impact of Amniocentesis in America*. New York: Routledge.

Adele E. Clarke
Nikolas Rose
Ilina Singh