

*Governed through Choice: Autonomy, Technology, and the Politics of Reproduction* Transcript

Author: Jennifer Denbow (JD)

In Conversation with: Brian Beaton (BB)

Date: February 19, 2016

Location: Robert E. Kennedy Library, San Luis Obispo, CA

Description: Transcript of a podcast of the discussion of the book, *Governed through Choice: Autonomy, Technology, and the Politics of Reproduction* between author Jennifer Denbow of political science and Brian Beaten of the College of Liberal Arts.

[Music]

Brett Bodemer (Moderator): Welcome to Conversations with Cal Poly Authors, this episode was recorded on Friday, February 19, 2016 at the Robert E. Kennedy Library at Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo. This conversation features Jennifer Denbow and Brian Beaten, discussing Jennifer's book, *Governed through Choice: Autonomy, Technology, and the Politics of Reproduction*, published by New York University Press in 2015. Jennifer Denbow is an assistant professor in the political science department at Cal Poly. She has a PhD in Juris Prudence and Social Policy, as well as a JD, both from the University of California at Berkeley. Her teaching and research interests explore the interactions of law, women, gender, and reproductive rights. Jennifer's conversational partner today is Dr. Brian Beaten. In addition to Brian's role as Director of the Center for Expressive Technologies at Cal Poly, Brian is an assistant professor in Cal Poly's College of Liberal Arts, and teaches courses in history and women's and gender study. Brian's expertise includes network technologies, data sharing, communications, and information systems. In the spirit of the mantra that information wants to be free, this podcast comes to you, free.

[Applause]

JD: So, thank you for that introduction Brett and for putting this whole thing on. And thank you very much, Brian, for being my interlocutor, and to all of you for being here. It's a great crowd, I'm glad to see you all. So, so Brett asked me to talk a little bit about the genesis of this book, and I was thinking about how there are many different ways in which you could tell the story of the origins of this book. So I have a friend who could probably tell you a compelling story about how this is rooted in my childhood and like, all these things. That's not the story I'm going to tell you. I'm going to story—tell you a little bit more of an intellectual story, but there will definitely be some personal moments, sort of will show how I came to this topic and what really got me interested in it. So, I'm going to start with college. So, I started out as an engineering major at the University of Michigan, and this you know, it's only in retrospect that this part of my history makes sense as sort of leading to this book. Because it was really my first experience of coming up, like not, having my voice sort of devalued and not really heard in this context of engineering school, so it's like 70% men, 30% women. There was lots of group work my first year or so and I just found over and over again, that like I wasn't being listened to. No one was really sort of like

expecting me to like be good at engineering and it was terrible, I hated it. So, I left the engineering school and I changed my major to philosophy. I mean in retrospect, this experience in engineering school was part of sort of the origin of my feminist consciousness and thinking about institutions and cultures, it's sort of devaluing certain people's experiences and knowledge in a more systematic way. So I switched my major to philosophy, much happier. And I take several different kinds of courses, so one thing I take is philosophy of science. I think this is important to understanding part of what I do in the book, which is to look at how medical experts kind of think about reproduction. And I think the philosophy of science sort of opened my eyes to the fact that science isn't something just for scientists to think about, right? That there's a really important role for political scientists and philosophers and historians, to think about what scientists do. And so I think it very much sowed the seeds for me later to sort of think about how, in my case, doctors, physicians, and medical researchers are thinking about things. Another really important experience as an undergraduate that I had was in a philosophy of law course that I took. And this course was, kind of opened my eyes to the fact that law, law, kind of like science, isn't something that should just be left to lawyers, right? It's something that philosophers and political scientists and all these other people should really be thinking about. And it also introduced me to the sort of like core idea that is really at the heart of this book, and I've been sort of thinking about ever since, which is kind of funny that it occurred to me as a junior in college through this course. And this idea, so we've got an article in this class that, the thesis of which was that having more choices or more options, doesn't necessarily make us more free or more autonomous and sort of the language of my book. That is that, having more options doesn't mean that we're really better at governing ourselves or being autonomous and being free. And this just kind of like, I was just so struck by this idea, because I think you know, growing up in the United States, we just kind of take for granted that choices and more choices are, more choices mean better for us, better for freedom and things. And this article looked at this conundrum in the context of euthanasia. So you know, if we, there's a sort of presumption that if euthanasia is legal that people will have more options. But the flip side of that is, it also potentially opens up people to subtle or not so subtle pressures to exercise that option, right? So maybe it's just so subtle as like hearing your caretakers talk about financial burden or you know, seeing sort of your caretakers being kind of tired or you know, and so it doesn't even have to be very explicit, but sometimes it is much more explicit. So this just really, I just was fascinated, I don't know why exactly but I thought this was a really interesting problem that I wanted to think about. And then, at the same time, you know, I you know, so I'm in Michigan and you know, thinking about American politics more broadly and where do you hear about choice the most in American politics? Well choice has become almost synonymous with the right to abortion, right? So that like they seem to like you know, you can just say choice and that's what people think you're talking about. And so it just got me thinking of like, what are the implications for this choice with regard to reproduction, given that we have such a complex social and political structure that can exert pressures on people, right? And so I just kind of like, I kind of shelved this as sort of like something maybe I wanted to think about in the future. And then I took a little bit of time off after I graduated and then I end up, at Berkeley doing simultaneous law degree and a PhD in this sort of interdisciplinary legal studies program. And I, you know again, this was sort of in the back of my mind, I was like, maybe I'll right my dissertation on something related to these complexities that I want to think about. So I, am

immersed—the first year of law school like was the most disorienting experience of my life, immersed in legal doctrine and all of these ways of thinking in language that were new to me. So I became, you know, good at sort of thinking about the law, but then simultaneously I was thinking a lot about the social and political context of the law. And also, specifically I was thinking a lot about political theory and how political like, ideas about in political theory have sort of connections with some aspects of law and legal doctrine. And then so the book really expands on the political theory of autonomy in really complex and dense ways. But, I then, I really think there were a couple key moments early on in graduate school that further promoted my interest in this topic. So one was that I very early on, joined this organization called The Berkley Journal of Gender Law Injustice, like it's a mouthful of a name and a really terrible acronym. But it was really important to sort of me furthering that sort of feminist consciousness that I had originally really come to early as an undergraduate. And in particular, through this group so if you don't know—in law schools, students actually publish the journals, so it was like we were deciding what kinds of scholarship we would publish and we were thinking about what kinds of scholarship was good or appropriate for the journal. And then through this experience, I really—the idea of intersectionality became really crucial to my thinking about feminism, right? The idea of intersectionality is just that we all have so many different experiences and so many aspects of our identity that we can't sort of separate them out, alright? So that if I was going to be talking about reproduction, I couldn't just sort of talk about all women as a group, right? That, that doesn't do service to sort of the complexities of people's experiences, particularly as they relate to race, and class, and sexual orientation, and all of these things that are really important to people's experiences in the world. And so, simultaneously, a dear friend of mine was trying to get sterilized, right? And she was in her mid-20s, white, she's at an elite law school, and she has a lot, and she has no children, that's really important, she has a really hard time finding a physician who's willing to sterilize her. She had actually moved to California from Kansas where she just—there was—she couldn't find anyone, alright. So, finally, she moves to California and after quite a battle, she finds a doctor who is willing to sterilize her. And she has like sort of many intertwined reasons for why she was seeking this at what of, sort of seems like a really young age. Part of it was her environmental concerns, part of sort of very personal about what she wanted for her life. But this kind of struck me as you know, an important moment in which experts who have all of this knowledge, right? Of sterilization and women's bodies and things, sort of telling my friend that she's not really sure, she doesn't really know what she wants, right? So it was really very much about these questions of autonomy and freedom that had interested me a lot earlier. And so, there's a whole chapter in the book about sterilization and it's really because, you know, this happenstance that I, you know, made this good friend who was going through this. But so simultaneously, right? I'm reading up on sterilization and the history of sterilization in the United States and it's a really trouble history, right? So that sterilization has been imposed on a lot of women without their consent, sometimes not, even without their knowledge, as a way of keeping some people from reproducing, right? The people that, whose reproduction is seen as problematic or you know, all these things. And so one of the most startling statistics I think is that in the mid 1970's, by a lot of estimates, about 25% of Native American women were sterilized without their consent. So there's like these two, two histories, right? These two stories that I start to think about in the context of, sort of science and medical expertise and

also sort of the law, right? There was no recourse for my friend to like go to the law and say like, someone needs to sterilize me, right? So physicians very much act as gatekeepers to a lot of important aspects of reproductive, of reproduction today. So, okay, so these two things are how you know, I'm thinking about intersectionality, thinking about sterilization, and then I start thinking some feminist science and technology studies literature. And I had just had this moment where I realized that sterilization is a technology, and that, in fact, so much of how we manage reproduction in our contemporary United States, is—centers around technology and issues of technology, right? Whether it's birth control or ultrasound or sterilization, they all kind of are important technologies. And kind of like—so to tie this back to my earlier interests in sort of how more options can create pressures, it's like well, this, having this option of sterilization creates the opportunity for experts to impose it on some women against their will and to withhold it from others when they want it, right? So I started seeing how this technology was, could be sort of important in sort of the governance of people, right? So that's kind of, the title of the book is *Governed through Choice*, and that's kind of what I'm getting at, right? That both options and also technology importantly—the way technology creates options sort of creates these opportunities for someone else to tell you what to do, right? Or what's good for you. And in a lot of cases, what is sort of what will facilitate your autonomy or freedom even. Okay, so somehow I managed to put all of the stuff I've talked about into a dissertation that satisfied my committee and then I, in time to get sort of my first job. And then I had the task ahead of me of revising the dissertation into a book. And so my focus shifts a little bit, right? So instead of satisfying these four members of my committee who have very different ideas of what I should be doing, I have to think more about a publisher and how is this, you know, how's this going to make sense? How is this going to be interesting to a publisher who doesn't know who I am? And so as I'm revising the dissertation for a book, the so-called war on women is taking off, okay? So this is in sort of the early 2010s, that there's this huge spike in the number of regulations that states are passing regarding women's reproduction. So, it's, I mean there's these charts you can look up and there's just like, you know, there's not many bills considered or laws passed in the states and then 2011 there's this huge spike. And I am thinking about this, right? This seems to be really related to some of the things I am doing in the book. And in particular as I started to look at some of the legislation that was being passed and in a lot of cases, upheld by courts, I started to realize that so many of the proponents of these laws, were using the language of autonomy. So for example, one of the pieces of legislation that I look at in the book is the so-called Texas Woman's Right to Know Act. And this is an act that requires women to get an ultrasound before they can get an abortion. And it's so much, what struck me as I was thinking about these issues of autonomy is like, it's, they're actually using the language of autonomy right? They're saying this is, this actually facilitates women's decisions and control over their bodies, right? So a lot of these laws are called Informed Consent Laws, right? It's like women need this knowledge to make good decisions, but the implication that sort of legislators know what a good decision is, right? What's good for women. And so it's sort of like I—so this helped me. I sort of ended up adding a whole chapter on those, these, this legislation, and in the end it really helped me sort of reframe the whole project around really, how autonomy is thought of so differently in different contexts and in particular how so much of the fight over reproduction in the United States is a fight over how we define autonomy, right? So in the one hand you have people defining autonomy in such a way that you know, making women get

ultrasounds before an abortion facilitates their autonomy and then you have people arguing the opposite, but in all cases, it's kind of, it's agreed in some, to some extent, maybe not completely, that autonomy, that women's ability to sort of control their lives is central, so this is one of the many things that I sort of try to grapple with in the book. So at the end of the day, I would say the book is, you know, a look at contemporary American law and politics around reproduction. In which, I really am most fascinated with the complexities and puzzles around how autonomy is thought of and around how technology sort of creates opportunities for people and actors to sort of undermine autonomy. Let me be clear, like my thesis at the end of the day isn't we should get rid of options or rights or technology, rather my point is to really think, to try to start at least, to think through the social and political context that creates all of these forces that do, I think, undermine the most sort of robust way of thinking about people's control over their bodies and lives. Okay, so I think I'll stop there. Is it—I know now I'm supposed to have a conversation, it's called conversations with Cal Poly Authors, not monologues, so Brian?

BB: So, alright, I wanted to start by just sort of walking through my reading of the book, a quick sort of survey of it. It's a really interesting book, it does a lot of interesting things. It touches on intellectual history, political history, history of law, the history of political theory, and I should say actually, I should start by saying that, I actually met Jenny—we're brand new faculty members here at Cal Poly, we're both in the College of Liberal Arts, I think we're both drawn to Cal Poly because of a lot of the exciting interdisciplinary things that are happening right now in the College of Liberal Arts. And we actually met at Kennedy Library, at New Faculty Orientation, you know, right here. You know, 4 months ago or something. And on our very first day of work, and so, you know, you meet someone and you, you know, you don't really know what they do and I was really excited to have this opportunity to read this book and sort of get to know Jenny in a different way and get to know her work. The book starts by walking us through several competing traditions of thinking about autonomy—what autonomy means. And I would say that I expected the book to start much more in the contemporary moment and I think what's so interesting is we're dropped right in and I'm reading about Rousseau, you know, and it's very much—you're drawing on a larger tradition or longer tradition of political theory and theorizing about autonomy and you essentially map for us, these competing traditions of autonomy and thought about autonomy. Autonomy as, you know, sort of proper self-governance, other modes of autonomy that we've opened, aren't so domineering or paternalistic, and then what you do, and what happens in the book is you walk us through, I think, the way it's set up in my reading is, we then end up looking at the conditions of possibility for contemporary reproductive politics and discourse in the present day United States. So we sort of start at the federal level, where you walk us through some landmark cases, and what's really interesting methodologically is that I hadn't seen the kind of close reading. You know, close reading is something that comes out of the liberal arts, you see people apply close reading to all kind of different types of texts. And the kind of close readings you're doing of federal cases, you know, of trying to get at the rationale in various decisions and pointing to how certain decisions are more ambivalent than we think they've been. And certain decisions that we might think have been really ambivalent are actually more specific than we realize. The book then moves to the state register, I would argue, and that we start to look at a kind of state by state, how

reproductive politics and policy is playing out right now, in this contemporary moment. And then shift into sort of discussions of the body and technology and the way in which competing cultures of expertise sort of figure into reproductive law and policy and the ways in which there's both this mobilization of autonomy by people in power to—who're using autonomy to mean, you know, in a kind of conservative way, to mean, you know, again, drawing on what you were just saying that you know, a lot of recent laws that have been passed that are attempting to limit access to reproductive health services and abortion services, are actually framed in the language of autonomy as you point out very effectively. And what we see then is this strange use of autonomy to mean that the state should decide, you know, who is able to sort of properly self-govern and make decisions about reproduction. And then you walk us through focusing on specific technologies, ultrasounds, sterilization technologies, and I think as you just said, and wrapped up your remarks, what's interesting is closed by arguing that there's also a lot of room for new types of potentialities, possibilities, agency, that in some ways what fascinated me about this book is you point out early in the text, that autonomy is a term that a lot of critical thinkers and writers have kind of moved away from, that has a lot of big—you know? And you, in some ways, I think are trying to recuperate autonomy and argue that autonomy can be used in critical ways. It can be used as to talk about or perform or reenact certain forms of social critique, certain kinds of social transformations, and in some ways, the whole book is this history of an idea of autonomy and how autonomy is being mobilized by competing communities right now and arguing that it need not be viewed as a conservative term. Is that sort of a fair, a fair reading?

JD: Yeah, I think so.

BB: Okay, I just wanted to make sure we're on the same page.

JD: I like it.

BB: Okay, so that's my reading of the book. Some questions that arose for me that I would love for us to talk about; the first question that comes to mind is the issue of California, it's not a book about California, so if you read this book, you know, we hear about Texas, we hear about the Dakotas, we hear about a lot of states that have been very aggressively working toward limiting access to certain kinds of health services and yet California figures in this book. It kind of lurks in this book in lots of different places. The friend that you mentioned that was seeking sterilization, in the passage within the book where you talk about that friend, was unable to access any kind of sterilization services until that friend moved to California and so in that moment, California is framed as you know, slightly more open, more progressive, you know, not in line with some over the other states and what's happening elsewhere in the country. At other times within the book though, Jenny writes about things like compulsory sterilization in California prisons, right? And California is not framed in this sort of open, progressive way. And what's lovely about this, not only are we new faculty, we're new, well, we're both returning to California and so California kept kind of figuring for me because the California that gets conjured in this book is so contradictory. I mean, at moments seems progressive and at moments seems not progressive at all. And I guess I was really curious and wondering if you

could tell us a bit more about where California figures within the landscape of contemporary debates about reproductive health, reproductive rights, law services. You know, where is California?

JD: Yeah. I think you're exactly right that California is this contradiction and so at the same time that this war on women is happening, which is still happening, the states are really restricting abortion access. California actually expands it by allowing nurse practitioners to perform abortions, right? So it's a real contrast to that trend, but then as you point out, it has this terrible history of, I mean I think it's a pretty punitive state. I mean a lot of states are. And so then we look at sterilization in California prisons, there are a lot of very recent documented cases of people being sterilized without their knowledge and sometimes the way it works is that a doctor in a prison will recommend a much more aggressive kind of surgery to, that will end up sterilizing someone, but to deal with a minor problem that could be dealt with, without sterilization. And that happens a lot in prisons. But the interesting thing to go back to California specifically is that, the reason California comes up in that sterilization chapter as much as it does is because I think part of it really goes to sort of the contradictory nature of California. Because the thing that California does have is a very extensive activist community and social justice organizations. So that the—I only really know about the extensiveness of the sterilization in the prisons because there's this amazing organization called, Justice Now, in Oakland, that makes it their mission to find out these things, right? And so they've also, they've also done a little bit of work in other states and there's some, you know, isolated stories in other states of sterilization happening in prisons, but I don't necessarily—and I looked, you know, and I'm not—you know, my research is sort of to try to make sense of what other people are doing. I don't go out and you know, get the statistics around these things. And there's just not a lot of evidence of it happening in other states, but it doesn't mean it's not happening. So I think that part of the way in which the contradiction in California works out is that they're simultaneously this very punitive state and very sort of, these policies particularly around incarceration, that get highlighted because there's also this tradition of activism and social justice in California. But it is, I mean, I don't fully understand the politics of California and as I'm returning I'm maybe realizing that more fully. But yeah, I think it's a—I don't know.

BB: Hmm, yeah, switching gears, another thing that came to mind is what are my roles here at Cal Poly? I'm the director for the Center for Expressive Technologies where we make digital tools and digital platforms, I'm also heavily involved and one of the core faculty members for our new science, technology, and society minors program, which is very project-based and so we're always having students sort of develop projects. I wanted to talk about ultrasound for a moment. I read this book and to me, immediately, I guess I should backtrack for a minute. One of the ideas I've been playing around with, with the Center for Expressive Technology is figuring out how to tie in the kinds of digital tools and platforms that we're making with research that's coming out of the College of Liberal Arts. And so I've just been flirting with this idea and I decided to apply it to this book. Of, you know, what if some of our projects were direct outcomes of research and scholarship that Cal Poly faculty members are putting out, and in this book, you know, the thing that seems to be remade and needs to be redesigned is ultrasound. As it's presented in this book, and you talk about how ultrasound is mobilized in these really

problematic ways and it creates and is meant to create certain kinds of both imagery and relationships and is meant to obviously dissuade women from having abortions and is really, really, I mean, it's really at the center, technologically—there's lots of technologies right now that are bound up in these larger developments, but ultrasound to me, comes through the loudest. Is it possible, I guess I started trying on the idea to remake ultrasound, so that you know, if we take that one of the things that's happening right now in contemporary policy is these new ultrasound mandates, right? So you have this kind of captive audience that is being forced to engage with ultrasound technologies or sonograms, what would it mean? Like what, what would it mean to have ultrasound sort of look differently or work differently? Is there any room there, technologically, for interventions into the kind of visual strategies that ultrasounds produce?

JD: Maybe, I think that it's, you know, I've actually, this is sort of one of my next projects is to look more into ultrasounds and I mean the thing, you know, ultrasound's like all visual technologies, it's not just sort of like this objective picture of reality, right? There's so many ways in which ultrasound is mediated and it's, it's, you know there are particular ways this happens in ultrasound and there's all these developments in ultrasound so there's 3D ultrasound now, and 4D ultrasound, and they're actually sort of they're a little bit in tension with sort of the medical purposes of ultrasound, because sometimes the pictures aren't really as helpful for medical practitioners but they're seen as helping women bond more with their fetuses. So, and that's interesting but, I don't know, maybe. I think my role is more or sort of analyst of technology, I would love to see someone remake technology in some interesting way and there are moments in the book where I talk about people who've thought about this right? So like what if we reorient the placenta in sonograms, right? Because that usually gets taken out and that is like this key connection between fetus and a woman, right?

BB: Uh huh.

JD: And, but we don't, but that's not part of you know, whatever, whenever we see pictures of sonograms which are like all over, right? We don't see that. But I think another thing that I have to say about that is, you know, you mentioned that there are, you know this technology is often forced on women, which is certainly true, but also I mean, women love it. Like women who are pregnant and you know, they, how many, I mean I've see so many pictures of, you know, friends' sonograms, and so it has you know, again, like so many of these technologies, these two different stories, right? And so I'm not sure, I'm not sure what it would mean exactly to remake it, but I like where you're going. I like where your students will go with it.

BB: Yeah, okay, well so building on that, if, if hypothetically, a team of students were to try to reimagine ultrasounds as a project, what would be the very first thing you'd say to them before we started our work? You know, what should we be keeping in mind?

JD: Yeah, I mean I think you just should be keeping in mind the political context of ultrasound and how it's used. Right? So that not to see it as this sort of technology that's isolated from politics because it's a really politicized technology in a lot of ways and I think just understanding



that, and grappling that would be key, right? So part of the questions of what kind of, how do you want to use it politically? Right? What is the goal of remaking ultrasound given its sort of history and current use?

BB: And then one of the things that prompts this question is what's happening with drones right now, in terms of reproductive services. I mean, a group called Women on Waves, that's done a lot of really interesting work providing abortions in international waters, on boats, just outside of countries where abortion is illegal, has now started turning to drones and is recuperating and trying to recover drones, a very much military technology steeped in very particular histories and is now dropping birth control and abortion pills in places like Poland, right? And so you're starting to see people turn to these technologies and actually try to tinker and remake them in really interesting ways, and so and I guess yeah, it's something maybe we'll come back and ask you for more thoughts.

JD: I'll think about it.

BB: To switch gears again, I'm really interested in something that you do in this book. You mobilize the term post-feminism and I had questions about this because I, myself is someone—I write a lot about feminist engagements with technology, women's engagements with technology. I have a recent paper out that's on Smartphone apps that are aimed to try to combat sexual assault and rape, and I very much avoid the language of post-feminism in my work, just because I think that if you know the history of feminism, it's a story of contradiction, it's a story of multitudes, there's been amazing work done by a lot of historians on when feminism became an ism in the 1910's by historian Nancy Cott, there's so much sort of tension and again, multiplicity within feminism that, you know, I think that in my work, when I'm writing about say, you know, people developing Smartphone apps using open innovation platforms that are couched in feminist rhetoric, that is still, regardless of how problematic some of those apps are, troubling or vexed, they, they're still instantiations of feminism and I've steered away from the language of post-feminism and so I was really fascinated to see that you talk about and use the language of post-feminism when you're thinking about how autonomy is being mobilized and troubling in problematic ways right now in the war on women that's happening. Could you talk about that? Could you, could you justify or unpack that collegially justify—

JD: Oh, a hard question.

BB: —why, what do you think, or I guess to ask this a different way, what do you think post-feminism is doing that just recognizing that it's not, yet again, another instantiation of feminism that we may or may not like in a long history of instantiations of feminism that we may or may not like.

JD: Mm hmm.

BB: What work does that do? And does it risk erasing the multitude and contradiction that feminism always was and is?

JD: Maybe. I hadn't thought about it, honestly, in that term, right? So, or in those terms that certainly I think now that you've expressed it, that does seem like a liability or potential thing that could come out of my use of post-feminism, but I think what it's doing for me and why I found it such a helpful term was that I think it, and the way that some of the theorists of post-feminism have thought about it, it just maps so well onto some of what I'm talking about, about how, you know, in these informed consent laws, people, legislators are using, wielding the language of autonomy and women's rights, and choice, in this way that really seems to undermine women's control, right? And so that was, that was key to me I guess. And then the sort of the idea of post-feminism right, is that we have the, in certain moments right now, there are both the, there's this language of feminism and maybe more sort of, the more non-controversial language of feminism that sits alongside sort of increased surveillance and management and I just thought that that was a very helpful idea for me to think through some of the technologies I'm looking at. And so I think, you know, I hope that in the end it helps more than it hurts in that, you just, it made, you know—when I came across that literature initially it just sort of, it clicked with so much of what I was reading as a really good explanation. But I also found moments in which I, what I was finding actually pushed against some of how post-feminism is thought about. But I mean, that's its interesting, I mean there is, of course, feminism had a really fraught and contradictory history. And so I could—maybe part of what I'm doing is just sort of asserting a particular type of feminism. That's not meant to sort of, you know, discount all other kinds but to say like, here, you know, among the many feminisms that we have, here's mine and here's what I feel comfortable telling some of these other instantiations of feminism, not really feminists, right? Because they sort of, they take the ideas that they've like—we don't—that we've moved beyond feminism right? So I'm kind of critiquing that I think by wielding it, that term. I don't know.

BB: Okay, okay, we can continue to discuss it maybe like privately. [Laughter]

JD: Yeah, I don't know how many of you are like steeped in this—

BB: Yeah.

JD: —controversy.

BB: Shifting gears again, I had a question about something you do, theoretically, or you do and how you mobilize particular people that you're thinking with. And it's, it comes up in how you use Donna Haraway. So, for those of you not familiar with Donna Haraway's work, landmark economical figure and feminist science studies, and you know, you're doing a lot of thinking with not just Haraway but, Judith Butler, with [inaudible] Deco? , I mean it's a very theoretically informed book, but something you do, which I found so fascinating is when you're talking about Donna Haraway, you stop and mention that her early writing on, she's someone who's written a lot on cyborgs, is of a moment from the cold war. You like explicitly historicize her briefly, it's in

one line, top of page 60, like in passing where you mention that Donna Haraway's work, oh, you know, and we have to remember Donna Haraway was writing in this cold war context and it struck me because, oh Adele Clark is someone else that you use, Adele Clark, Judith Butler, [inaudible], so many of the other people you're thinking with. That same label could easily be applied to any of them. All of Judith Butler's work, her early work and performativity, we could easily stop and say, oh and by the way, of course this is an artifact of the cold war but we don't do that, right? And you don't do that. But we do it with Haraway, or you did it with Haraway, right? And so Haraway suddenly, everyone else is sort of either trans historical in terms of who you're thinking with and they're not sort of resituated within a particular moment but Haraway is like dragged and dropped back into the cold war. And I'm just wondering what, if you could talk about that for a moment and what that does, because I think in one way it risks de-elevating Haraway's work and you know, it says like oh, you know these other people have this kind of trans historical ideas that we should continue to think with, they're not of a particular moment, but this one person is. Another argument is that it actually elevates Donna Haraway's work and says, you know, these other people, it's really worth knowing her history, and these other people kind of don't have a history that matters or is worth talking about. And I think another reason I found it so provocative is it actually forced me, for the first time really I'll be honest, to think about the other people you don't do that to. So, you know, the idea of situating Judith Butler's early work and performativity as an artifact of the cold war, I don't know anybody doing that work, right? That's a really upside down fascinating way to start talking about Butler, that you make thinkable because you do it with Haraway. So could you just talk a little bit about what that's about?

JD: Mm hmm, yeah. So, I love this sort of more history question or like, you're clearly a historian right? I don't think, right, like these are like, this is why interdisciplinary conversation is good. I you know, I see myself as a political theorist largely, right? And so the tradition of political theory like, it's not one in which there's necessarily a lot of historization, if that's a word. There's some—and I think there are moments when I'm talking about people that it's more clear, and the story though why Haraway's particularly, is situated in the cold war is kind of strange or maybe not super satisfy—it wasn't like super conscious, I guess. What happened is an earlier version of one of these chapters, I published as an article and one of the reviewers of the journal didn't really love the way I was using Haraway, and thought that I needed to situate Haraway more in the cold war, in part to sort of justify how I was using her, and her thoughts. So that's why I put it in there right? Because, to satisfy this reviewer and I think the reviewer made a good point and it, you know, did help sort of draw out how I was using her work. But I think also, the, where Haraway really introduces the, or comes into the book is in the chapter on sterilization, right? She helps me really think through how we might think about sterilization, and sterilization also has sort of this history that's entangled sort of very historical history. And is entangled in the cold war in some ways and so I think that's another reason in why she's historicized in the way she is. But, I don't know, I mean I think that, that it would be interesting to really think about these other thinkers as products of the cold war and it'll probably lead you to a really kind of different analysis maybe, than what I'm doing. So I think part of it's just sort of my disciplinary framework and then this just sort of happenstance that reviewer was like, I don't know about how you're using Haraway, you know, this is sort of the backstory of when

she's writing this and why it might be important and so then I took that on as a way to sort of help to bolster my own use of her thinking.

BB: Mm hmm. My last question, before we sort of throw it open to the audience, involves the idea of informed consent and information. In some ways, this book is all about information. And it's really interesting how information figures to someone who used to work at an information school, and still heavily engages with folks in information science and developing information systems and information services, you know, we have kind of this slogan, information wants to be free. And what we promote is information literacy, information access, and what's interesting about a lot of the state level laws that you track over the last, you know, 5 to 6 years, is they're essentially pushing information. They're taking this idea of informed consent and using it to force information, a very particular types on women who are seeking, you know, reproductive health services. And I was really struck by that. This idea of being reminded that you know, information is not obviously, inherently good and can be mobilized in these really, really specific, and specifically troubling ways. Could you talk a little bit about you know, for folks who aren't having that conversation about maybe the dark side of, you know, the way information is being used in those encounters with physicians. You know, is there something more that we should be thinking about in terms of, what does it mean the be pushing that kind of information and especially if you're someone who normally dedicates yourself to promoting information access and as much information as possible. That rhetoric is exactly the rhetoric that's being used by law, conservative lawmakers, to actually help limit access to health services. Which suddenly then, like moves a whole bunch of information folks into a really troubling camp.

JD: Yeah.

BB: And so I was just wondering if you could talk a bit about that.

JD: Well and I think that's precisely why this language of some legislators is so compelling, right? Because it's like, well what's the problem with information? Right? Isn't information, and go back to the earlier idea that I introduced, isn't information a way to facilitate good choices and all of these things, right? Seems unobjectionable, but I think what you have to be reminded of is that information is always politicized, right? There's always a context in which information is being introduced, right? There's always a story of what information you're getting, how it's framed, right? And this is no more apparent than in the context of abortion, right? Where there's such fraught and contentious ideas about its meaning, right? And so, as you were talking I thought about sort of a parallel, maybe a parallel kind of language that gets used more in legal circles, right? And that's regard to sort of freedom of speech, right? So that like okay, information is good, what was that I loved that phrase, information wants to be free. How can information want anything? But then, you know, there's this parallel discussion I think of free speech, right? Where we think of like, well free speech is good, right? How can it be bad? Don't we just want to focus on speech, right? It allows us a diversity of viewpoints, right? And on the one hand, right, that's unobjectionable, then on the other hand, if we think about what kinds of speeches emphasize, where, and to what purposes, it becomes a lot more complicated. And

that in some ways I think, to go back to this context I think more about, that an overemphasis on freedom of speech actually detracts from these questions of what the speech is being used to do. And that sometimes, depending on the context, that's a more important question. And then not to deny free speech, or not to deny free flow of information, but to think about its context, right? I think that is what I think is more, or equally, or more important than a lot of context. Thank you.

[Applause - Music]

Moderator: This podcast is a 2016 production of the Robert E. Kennedy Library, with music by Doug Irion. Visit our blog at Kennedy Library Out Loud, at [lib.calpoly.edu/outloud](http://lib.calpoly.edu/outloud), there you can find other stories and media from Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo.

[Music]