Getting Curious with Jonathan Van Ness & Dr. Jacki Antonovich

JVN [00:00:00] Welcome back to Getting Curious, I'm Jonathan Van Ness and every week I get to sit down for an incredible conversation with a brilliant expert to learn all about something that makes me curious. On today's episode, I'm joined by Dr. Jacki Antonovich, where I ask her: What's the history of reproductive healthcare in the United States? And before we dive in, I just want to say something really quickly. This was one of the eye-opening episodes of Getting Curious I've ever recorded – I learned so much. If you were ever going to share an episode of Getting Curious with someone, and if you were ever going to get passionate about a particular topic, this is one for me that really blew my mind. So let's dive in!

Welcome to Getting Curious. This is Jonathan Van Ness. This is a really important episode and we're really excited to put it together. We're going to jump right in. Welcome to the show Professor Jacqueline Antonovich, who is a historian of health and medicine in the U.S. at Muhlenberg College, with particular interest in how race, gender and politics shape the medical field and access to health care. She is also the co-founder of Nursing Clio, an open access, peer-reviewed collaborative blog project that ties historical scholarship to present day issues related to gender and medicine. Welcome to Getting Curious, Jacqueline. How are you?

JACKI ANTONOVICH [00:01:20] Oh, well, thank you for having me. I'm doing okay. How are you?

JVN [00:01:24] Really good, thank you. Thank you. Not that you asked, and nor did anyone. But I will just say I did a rearing good, like, like, a way above average eighth grade biography of Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy Onassis. Just so everyone knows, I did do that. I don't know if I still have it anywhere, but it was a really good report on, on her.

JACKI ANTONOVICH [00:01:45] I will say that that's who I am named after, so…

JVN [00:01:47] Ah! And when her husband was president in the sixties, abortion rights were not guaranteed. And one thing that I think that, I mean, I actually just learned this, one of my very best friends, her mom was telling me that she used to work at the Quincy Police Station back in the sixties as, like, a secretary. And she told me that monthly, women would die from at-home, self-induced abortions. And this was a very common thing to see in police departments at the time. Women slumped over toilets and bathtubs. I'm not being hyperbolic. I'm not being, like, that was the reality of what would happen multiple times a month pre Roe v. Wade. And that's something I just did not understand. And I think so often on Getting Curious or just in my life, I'm commonly shocked by truths of our history that I didn't learn about until way too late. And I think so often it's, like, under this guide of, like, not wanting to scare children, which is, like, why we don't talk about it. But that's really–, your, your scholarship is incredible, and also Nursing Clio. If you're someone who doesn't read blogs and

you're not, like, all up in the blog world, you should really be following this one and reading about it. Can you just start off by kind of telling us a little bit about what your work is in and, and what it really means when, when we say in that intro that "you have particular interest in how race, gender and politics shape the medical field and access to health care."

JACKI ANTONOVICH [00:03:13] Yeah, sure. I mean, that's a, that's a really important question. And one of the reasons why I started Nursing Clio in 2012. It was an election year and there were politicians and pundits on CNN talking about things, like, "legitimate rape." Right? Or talking about things, like, "holding an aspirin in between your legs, you know, so that you don't get pregnant." I have a whole friend group of others who are historians of gender and medicine and race and sexuality. And we would talk about how all of these people were missing the historical context. All of these political discussions that we have have histories and nobody talks about those. And so, you know, I really do feel like the history of gender in medicine, especially how it intersects with race and sexuality is a discourse, as you mentioned, that's really missing from the news media and all of that. And, and you're right, when we don't do that history, when we don't regularly interrogate that history, we forget about things like how brutal back alley abortions were or self-induced abortions. And it is really hard to talk about. But as we see with, with Roe, you know, probably, you know, being overturned any moment now. It's really important to have these conversations, even if they're difficult.

JVN [00:04:36] One thing that really pisses me off, I was just reading it this morning on BuzzFeed was those stories about, like, "What's too much for a bachelorette party?" And in this article they talk about how expensive the price of the plane ticket is, the hotel, the cab, the food. So if you don't have, like, you know, $4000, $3,000 of disposable income, which is how much you're going to pay for the flight and the hotels and stuff, you might not be able to get that health care if you're, say, in Tennessee or Louisiana or Oklahoma, that has now passed these incredibly restrictive abortion bans. So, like, we are going to see women again dying of at home, back alley abortions. And that is 100%, not to be hyperbolic again, but if you voted for Donald Trump in 2016, that is 100% on you. And now we have to fix it. Now we all have to come together and figure out how to fix what is sure to be a complete fucked up mess. But we can't fix what's going on now if we don't understand where we came from. So we are recording this amidst the potential rollback of Roe v. Wade, although I think we can, we need to assume that it is rolled back. We shouldn't waste any time. By the time this episode is out, the Supreme Court's decision will likely be final. So, Jesus Christ, it's chilling. What stands out to you as a historian about this moment?

JACKI ANTONOVICH [00:05:57] Well, I think, you know, I think I will answer this question in two ways. I'd actually like to answer this question as a historian who identifies as a woman. Right. I was born in 1973. And as I come up to my 50th birthday, I realize that I've had my entire life, during my entire reproductive life, abortion has been legal for me if I needed it. And to me, the fact that I also have daughters and that they won't grow up with the same human right that I had is especially chilling. Now, as a historian, I would say that one of the

things that I think really is—, that I'm struck with is Alito's misunderstanding and misuse of history in his leaked opinion. Right. He, you know, makes these claims that, "abortion is not rooted in U.S. history." And then he points to one guy who lived in England in the in the 1700s to make the case that everyone was against abortion and that abortion was wrong. Right. And, of course, this same guy, Matthew Hale, like, burned people at the stake for witchcraft. Not a great guy. That's not how we do history, right, we don't cherry pick our arguments.

JVN [00:07:27] So let's not skip over that really quick. So I really just want to, like, really ride this home. So Alito's appointed by George H.W. Bush, the president, from 2000 to 2008, the guy who, like, invades Iraq. So then Alito is now in the Supreme Court. And in this leaked opinion, he literally points out this judge, this British judge or legislator guy, who lived in the 1700s, who literally, according to the law at the time, burned women at the stake for being witches.

JACKI ANTONOVICH [00:07:58] Yes.

JVN [00:07:59] That is the person that he quotes in this leaked Supreme Court of the United States in 2022. Like, that is something we need to let that come into it. You know, people say a lot of things, but we're–, we really have a justice of the United States Supreme Court citing a legislator from the 1700s who burned women at the fucking stake. And when we think about what else was codified into law in the 1700s, there was a lot that was codified into the law in the 1700s that we know is in–, sub-human, not, and not of a moral compass that anyone would ascribe to today. So he quotes that guy and then he says, "No, abortions weren't deeply rooted in U.S. history." And to that we're saying that is not true because they were trying to get abortions in the 1700s?

JACKI ANTONOVICH [00:08:54] Yeah, absolutely. So if we, if we, if we want to understand the history of abortion, we actually have to kind of step back and understand the history of women's health in general. And, you know, prior to the 19th century, women largely were the ones who were in control of their reproductive health and their reproductive lives. They are the ones that had sort of the wisdom on things like how to space out your births, how to use birth control and and how to do an abortion if needed. Abortion was a regular part of women's healthcare. And so for Alito to allude to one guy in, in England and cherry pick his history, it's just not accurate. We also have to understand the ways in which we conceptualize health, too. Health in, up to mid-19th century was sort of viewed as a balance, right, your balance of humors. If you've heard of humoral medicine. And if you were sick, it meant that one of your humors was out of balance. Right. And so you would have to work to get that humor back into balance, which is where you may have heard of things like bloodletting and things like that.

Yeah, and so women, when they didn't get their period, they didn't necessarily think that it was pregnancy. They maybe looked at it as a blockage or an imbalance. So they would do things like taking different kinds of herbs like Pennyroyal or Tansy or Savan. We have all of these domestic medicine books that give instructions on how to and what they would call

“bring down the flowers.” And and so pregnancy actually wasn't even really considered a thing until about 15 to 24 weeks of pregnancy. And that's when you would have the “moment of quickening.” And quickening is basically, like, when you feel the baby kick, right? When you can feel the baby moving around inside of you. That would be considered when the soul entered the fetus. And that would be when you were considered pregnant. And so any sort of abortion that you would induce yourself or have a midwife induce prior to about 24 weeks of pregnancy was not an issue at all, and it was actually practiced quite regularly.

JVN [00:11:14] So historically who, like, would, like, seek out an abortion?

JACKI ANTONOVICH [00:11:21] I mean, anybody who could get pregnant. It was very, very common.

JVN [00:11:25] And how would we see that in, like, the historical text, like, would they be, like, “Ye lady Sally would go to the midwife to take the pennywort until the flowers, raineth,” or something?

JACKI ANTONOVICH [00:11:39] Exactly that! No, so we actually have a lot of evidence of this. We have, as I mentioned, we have a lot of these domestic medicine handbooks that were produced. And they would have recipes that would be for, you know, like, as I said, like, “bringing down the flowers” or to “start your menses” as that they would call it. We also—I mean, I think one of the things that was making the news lately was that even Benjamin Franklin had an abortive recipe in one of his books. So we have a lot of those. And we also have one of the most famous documentations that we have is a, is a diary of a midwife named Martha Ballard, who kept a diary every day as her practices. And then, you know, if things went wrong you would maybe find these things in court cases or in newspapers, especially later on when abortion starts to become criminalized.

JVN [00:12:35] So historically, it was always a kind of midwives who would perform them?

JACKI ANTONOVICH [00:12:40] Yes. I mean, prior to about the mid-19th century and then later, you know, physicians began to perform them more.

JVN [00:12:48] So prior to, like, the 1850s when you, like, first, you know, diddle, up until we knew he feel the baby kick that's not controversial the midwife gives you a little potion of, like, some hogwart, penny weed, polyjuice potion. And then, do they work? Did, like, abortion tonics work?

JACKI ANTONOVICH [00:13:08] I mean we… I think there's contradicting evidence about whether these items worked as abortifacients or not. But I will, I do want to say that, you know, some of these substances are really dangerous if taken in the—you know, anybody listening to this, right—if taken in the wrong quantities, can be really dangerous. So I don't want to romanticize it and say that, you know, “women had abortions all the time and they were fine

and they didn't, you know, get sick or die." Because that did happen, but it was not seen as controversial. And I would say that we get, like, the first law against abortion in Connecticut around the 1820s, and that is mainly enacted to protect women from abortion through poison. Right. So if they were, they took too much of something. But it wasn't to protect the fetus. It was to protect the mother. A lot of these abortion laws that we first get in the 19th century have absolutely nothing to do with the fetus. They have to do with protecting the women from, like, unscrupulous abortion doctors are getting hurt.

JVN [00:14:20] Is that what it was really, like, at risk to the people seeking abortions and the providers at the time was, like, causing someone to become severely ill or die?

JACKI ANTONOVICH [00:14:27] Yes, absolutely. We have this really wonderful source about a woman who got pregnant out of wedlock and then her, her boyfriend at the time, and this is during the Puritan era, wanted her to get an abortion. Her name was Sarah Grosner, and they first tried to do herbs and that didn't work. And then they found a doctor to do it. And then she later died because, you know, medical care at the time for anyone was pretty dangerous. And the, the doctor was put on trial not because of killing a fetus, but because the woman died. And so that was generally what people objected to.

JVN [00:15:11] Got it. Wow. Yes. So the right to abortion is, like, one thing. But then there's also, like, forced contraception, which has another long history in the US. I don't know, my, my automatic shade keeps, like, lifting and lowering, like, so if you hear, like, a weird like "grr, grr", I don't know what that is. I thought I was sitting on the remote, but I'm not, I'm like, oh, it's, like, literally over there and it's really, it's like a ghost or something. There's like a pro-life ghost who like, not into this. [LAUGHTER] But what is the history of forced birth control and sterilization in the US? Because it's, like, it happens.

JACKI ANTONOVICH [00:15:50] Yes. And this is a super important history that I actually think and I think other scholars in this area would agree. You can't actually look at the history of reproductive rights without also looking at the history of reproductive restrictions. This really began and centers on the sort of topic of eugenics. How familiar are you with eugenics?

JVN [00:16:13] Oh, we're pretty familiar with eugenics. So on the TV show Getting Curious we did an episode on the history of the gender binary and we learned from ALOK, who we are huge fans of over here that actually, like, the enforcement of the gender binary was born from, like, the first cousin of Darwin who invented eugenics and was just like this fuck who was saying that, like, people who, like, ascribe to, like, other gender ideas like were, you know, like, not "civilized" the way that the Europeans are. So they were trying to, like, spread civilization because it was, quote, like, "savages" and "barbarians" and stuff who, like, let women, like, hunt and like the men wore skirts. And so that wasn't, like, seen as "civilized." So they really started to, like, vilify and, like, pathologize, like, gender and, like ,criminalize gender in a really severe way. So, yeah, eugenics sucks, we, we know a little bit about it, but

just in case someone's like, it's their first time listening to this podcast and maybe they don't, maybe they don't know, give it to us and then tell us about it.

JACKI ANTONOVICH [00:17:13] Sure. Yeah. Well, that was an excellent summary actually.

JVN [00:17:16] And who was Darwin's cousin, who is that fucker?

JACKI ANTONOVICH [00:17:18] Francis Galton.

JVN [00:17:20] Fuck him, fuck Francis Galton, crusty dick. We hate him. We're going to call him Crusty Dick. But I'm writing down "Crusty dick. Francis Dalton." Galton.

JACKI ANTONOVICH [00:17:31] Galton. Yes, yes, yeah, that is–

JVN [00:17:33] And he had some gall. Is that where that word comes from? [CROSSTALK] Yeah, but anyway, so he invents it in, like, the 1800s?

JACKI ANTONOVICH [00:17:42] The late 1800s. You know, there are a lot of people who are at this time sort of thinking about race science. But Galton is the one who coined the term eugenics, which means, "well born," and it's this idea that you can manipulate human genes through better breeding. So, I mean, one of the most simple ways to think about it is the ways in which we genetically modified crops. It was thought that we could also do this to humans. And this idea I can't, I can't overemphasize how many people bought into eugenics. When I'm teaching eugenics to my students, I don't call it a pseudoscience. I call it a science because at the time it was considered legitimate science, really bad science and horrible, racist science.

JVN [00:18:27] But even now, like there are people ascribe to things that they don't even realize are eugenics, but they are, like, it's very still common for people to like not believe in interracial marriage, like, not believe in all sorts of shit because they're like, you know, they don't realize that it's hardcore racism, but it's fucking hardcore racism that like, causes them to, like, think about things that are literally, like, in the same house as eugenics but maybe like on the front porch. It's, like, not blatant, but it's, like, pretty there, you know.

JACKI ANTONOVICH [00:19:00] Yeah, yeah. And I think, I think, you know, and it—, that's a really important point because it's important to understand how we got to these forced sterilizations because a lot of people bought into this idea. And so we have two strands of eugenic thought. We have positive eugenics and negative eugenics. Positive eugenics was this idea of, you know, "How do we take the very 'best' of the best of the best in our, in 'our' eyes," sort of read, you know, Anglo-Saxon white Protestants? "How do we get them to breed more?" Right. "Well, we'll pass marriage laws. We'll have these better baby contests where everybody will bring their baby to the fair and we'll judge who's the best one." Then negative eugenics, on the other hand, was this idea of, "Okay, well, how do we keep the 'worst of the worst,'" in their minds, anybody who was not Anglo-Saxon, white, Protestant. "How do we

keep them from not breeding." Right. And one of the ways that we do this is through forced sterilization. And in 1927, we get this Supreme Court case, Buck v. Bell, which basically decides that it is okay to sterilize people against their will for the common good.

JVN [00:20:13] And that's what year?

JACKI ANTONOVICH [00:20:14] 1927.

JVN [00:20:16] So in 1927, the Supreme Court rules. So does Buck sue the government because they were sterilized and they didn't want to be. And then the Supreme Court was, like, "Yeah, no, sorry."

JACKI ANTONOVICH [00:20:27] Well, actually, what happens is there is this girl named Carrie Buck, and she is in an institution for being what they called "feeble minded." We know now that she had a "normal" intelligence. And, you know, we have several interviews with her. And there's a historian named Paul Lombardo who's written a lot about this. But she was institutionalized because she had a baby out of wedlock. And I should note that the baby, she became pregnant through a relative had raped her. But at the time, you know, baby out of wedlock, it means that she's "sexually immoral," which means there must be something wrong with her, which means she's feeble minded. So she was put in an institution in Virginia, and her mother was actually in the same institution. So they were institutionalized together for similar reasons. And then she had a baby because she was pregnant and officials deemed her feeble minded as well. And so what they did was they assumed that, "Well, here we can prove that we have these three generations of women who are passing down bad genes." This is a perfect test case to bring to the Supreme Court. And so they basically hired Carrie a lawyer. But the lawyer that they hired for her was a eugenicist in order to get this law passed. They wanted the Supreme Court to pass this law so that everybody and all the states could pass these laws. And so, you know, they found that, indeed, there's this very famous Supreme Court, quote, "Three generations of imbeciles is enough." And they said, "We have to stop this." And they did. And so then after that, many states passed forced sterilization laws. And we have thousands and thousands and thousands of people who were sterilized against their will.

JVN [00:22:16] So one thing about history that I learned and thought was interesting was that, like, Mary Todd Lincoln was institutionalized for spending too much money by her eldest son, like, after Abraham Lincoln was assassinated. And then the second she got out, she, like, hightailed it to Paris because she was, like, "Fuck these goddamn fuckers. They're going to put me–" So, like, women's rights were severely subjugated. Like, women were institutionalized for, like, living life, like, all the time. So I guess another thing that we have to understand about, like, the "feminist movement" is that up until 1921, up until the suffragette movement, white women were really fighting for equal power and playing fields so that their, like, white husbands, sons, uncles, dads, whoever couldn't institutionalize them. So when they didn't allow Black women and women of color to join, there was, like, frankly, selfishness. And

kind of a duality that, like, white women were literally getting fucked over left, right and center by their male counterparts. *And* at the same time, they did sacrifice allyship with other women in name of getting that freedom of white maleness, of the power of white maleness. So that's kind of interesting to me that we see that happen, you know in the suffragette, like, but then in the '27 but then to 1921, but then in '27 she's still getting institutionalized for three generations of… So that didn't even work. So, ah! So even though she's even proving that even now. So they would still get it. So do you think I'm, like, a nightmare anti-feminist for saying that or like do or what am I trying to say?

JACKI ANTONOVICH [00:23:46] Well, here's what I will tell you, because I am you know, I consider myself a hardcore feminist. But, you know, many of the women that I study, many of the white women that I study were suffragists, but they were also, like, basically very racist and also eugenicists. You know, history is very complicated, we want to sort of make heroes of many of these white women who were fighting for suffrage because, you know, suffrage is a great cause. But we have to also understand that many of these same women were behind some of the most insidious, racist campaigns in, in U.S. history.

JVN [00:24:24] So, basically, Buck v. Bell happens in 1927. And after that, they're saying, like, "Okay, forced sterilization, it's a thing. It's to spare the 'public good.'" Who was notably subjected to those practices? And, and actually, just because the government said that it was okay in 1927, that didn't mean that it wasn't happening before that. It was probably happening a lot before that anyhow.

JACKI ANTONOVICH [00:24:48] You're absolutely right. And there are several states that passed sterilization laws prior to Buck v. Bell and then there are several that passed them after Buck v. Bell. And even states who don't pass the sterilization law doesn't mean that it wasn't happening. The weird thing about history is that the states who did pass it, we have these ginormous paper trails, right? Because it was a whole institutional process. But we do know that, for example, Colorado, which is a state that didn't have a sterilization law, they did it anyway. It's harder to document because they didn't have the paper trail. But the people, in the very beginning, the people who are being sterilized are largely poor white women. But as we move forward, this becomes a lot more racialized.

JVN [00:25:37] There was some TV show I think I was watching where this one woman who I think was formerly enslaved or she was, like, a first generation survivor from being, like, formerly enslaved. She goes to this town of what seems like all these, like, really like, you know, well-to-do, like, other Black people. And she's, like, "Oh, my God. Yay. I finally found a bank that I can, like, work at, and it's like, all chill." But then the guy is, like, "Oh, but you have to see this pill," and she's like, "But I don't want to not have babies," and he's, like, "Oh, no, it's actually for your own good." But it was, like, this story about, like, forced sterilizations of Black women in, like, South Carolina or North Carolina I think goes like in the 1800s. So do we see like prior to Buck v. Bell in the twenties and, like, the earlier like one of, like, the white

women, like, weren't they doing, like, forced sterilization of, like, certain Black people, like, and people who were enslaved, like, like, even earlier, like, in the 1800s?

JACKI ANTONOVICH [00:26:25] So, well, I would say that during slavery, it was in the best interest of enslavers to actually have women that they enslaved, to have a lot of babies because that was property. So that wasn't really a thing at the time. But once we get these sterilization laws in the very beginning, there is this concern about "over institutionalization." And so sterilizing people was a way in which to sort of curb that problem. And, and at first, there's a lot of focus on, like, the "wrong" kinds of white women who are, you know, having too many babies. But it very quickly does become racialized. Places like California, you have both men and women being sterilized. But it's mainly Mexican men and women who are being sterilized. In the south, once they start passing their sterilization laws, it becomes black women. And as we move through the 20th century, even though eugenics sort of gets debunked, even though I would argue it's still there, we are starting to sterilize women of color at alarming rates. And this really doesn't come into light until the 1970s where we have a bunch of court cases. And I really think that's important to pause and realize that women were being sterilized against their will, women of color, as late as the 1970s.

JVN [00:27:48] How did that happen?

JACKI ANTONOVICH [00:27:49] Well, one example would be in Los Angeles in the 1970s, there was a hospital where poor Mexican women would come in to give birth. And when they were in labor, hospital officials, nurses, and doctors would ask them to sign paperwork. And they would say things like, you know, sometimes they would say "sterilization," sometimes they wouldn't. But there was sometimes a translation barrier there, right, to understanding what that meant. And so while they were in labor, they were asked to be—, to sign this paperwork, which was basically an authorization to be sterilized. So women would go in, give birth, and then leave the hospital not knowing that they were sterilized. And there was a court case called Madrigal v. Quilligan, in which all of these women found out that they were sterilized against their will. They sued the hospital and they lost. They lost because they signed the paperwork. But what that did was it created a bunch of new failsafe measures where women would have to have, like, a 24-hour waiting period if they agreed to be sterilized so that they could come home and think about it.

Now, this is really important because this created, in the 1970s, a clash between white feminists and women of color feminists, right. Because white feminists were basically arguing, "Reproductive choice. I should be able to have an abortion when I want. I should be able to get sterilized when I want. I should be able to get sterilized on demand. I shouldn't have to wait. I shouldn't have to ask anybody if it's my body, if I want it, I should get it now." But women of color were, like, "Well, hey, wait a minute. You know, these sterilization on demand laws are dangerous for us because of incidences like this Los Angeles hospital. If we really want to be inclusive of our feminism, we have to think about reproductive justice, not reproductive rights, and giving all women the broad spectrum of rights, whether that is to not

have children or to have more children." So I think that's just a really important point to point out.

JVN [00:30:06] So how did they mend that issue in the seventies?

JACKI ANTONOVICH [00:30:11] Well, we now have I mean, it's still I think it's still a little bit of a point of contention. But we do now have in several states with laws, like, waiting periods where you have to just wait, you know, a few days, if you can, to be you can't just walk in and get, you know, sterilized. I mean, these are fail safes because of these instances of injustice that happened with women of color.

JVN [00:30:32] So, in the '20s, and as these laws get passed and in California, it's, like, predominantly affecting, like, people of, like, Latinx descent. In the South it's, like, Black Americans. How does, like, nativism and racism underline that?

JACKI ANTONOVICH [00:30:50] Well, I mean. To me, when you ask that question, I can't help but think about the recent shooting in Buffalo, right, the mass shooting that we just had where that guy wrote this manifesto talking about "the great replacement theory." And, you know, this idea that people of color are going to start, and especially immigrants, are going to start outnumbering white Protestants. And I mean, it's so disturbing and chilling, but really, this is a history that goes way back. This, this idea, this fear that, you know, immigrants and people of color were going to start outnumbering white Protestants in the United States is basically why all of these eugenics policies were passed. It's why we had these forced sterilization policies. And, you know, and I think to me as a historian of medicine, it's really important to interrogate the ways in which we have perpetuated medical violence against marginalized communities in this way. I don't really think that you can study the history of medicine without interrogating those issues.

JVN [00:32:04] So how does, like, the Protestant morality come into play with like the just kind of public ideas of, you know, what was acceptable and what was unacceptable in America in the, like, late 1800s, early 1900s?

JACKI ANTONOVICH [00:32:19] Well, I think this gets back to this idea of this category that we sort of invented under the umbrella of eugenics, of feeble mindedness.

JVN [00:32:27] So, like, a queer person would be feeble minded cause you, like, wanted to suck dick. And, you know, everybody wants to suck dick, but you just can't go sucking dick or, you know, you can't just go like, fucking lots of people. Spending too much could make you feeble minded. Isn't it anything?

JACKI ANTONOVICH [00:33:42] It's pretty much a catchall diagnosis for anything that doesn't align with Protestant morality. And it's this idea that someone who is feeble minded, you might not know by looking at them, but you could probably tell by their behavior. And it's

because there was this idea that they were frozen in their development and, you know, maybe, like, a 14- or 15-year-old phase, you know, and that they didn't have good judgment. And so for, you know, straight women, if they were sexually promiscuous, then there was something wrong with them and they were feeble minded. If you were a man and you had sex with another man, there was something wrong with you and you are feeble minded. So it really was a way in which to take these ideas of Protestant morality and pathologize them and, and then either be institutionalized and maybe even be sterilized.

JVN [00:33:41] So in your work, you've written about the link between the medical profession and the 1920s Klan. Very interesting. And specifically, their obsession with reproductive surveillance. Quote "reproductive surveillance." That was, like, something they openly talked about. What were the Klan's broader aims and beliefs at this time?

JACKI ANTONOVICH [00:33:59] Yeah. So for, for, for people who might not be familiar, you know, we basically sort of see different waves of Klan activity, right? The first Klan happens in the Reconstruction Era. My work focuses on the second Klan, which comes about in—, starting in 1915 and throughout the 1920s.

JVN [00:34:19] Dr. Icenhauer-Ramirez, rest in peace, he was, like, incredible, like, was an expert in, like, Civil War history. We interviewed him about, like, what happened all the racist fucks from the Confederacy. And one thing that I didn't realize about history is that, like, Abraham Lincoln is killed four days after the north, like, you know, wins. And so he doesn't really live to see Reconstruction. And then his vice president is, like, this racist Southerner who was, like, the only senator who didn't secede in the union, which is like why he became vice president, because, like Lincoln thought that he could, like, bridge them. But then he basically says, like, "Fuck your reconstruction, fuck your mule, fuck your acres. Like, we're not making good on dick. Like, get fucked. Like, you are, you know, you got your freedom. And lucky for you and we're going to pass all these, like, Jim Crow laws now." So isn't that kind of what happened, like, from 1865 to, like, 1875 was, like, kind of okay, but then it gets really fucked up or is it basically never okay? It's, like, kind of never okay, right?

JACKI ANTONOVICH [00:35:11] It's kind of, like, never okay. But your summary is very good. I mean, essentially what happens is during the Reconstruction era and you know, it's in this era where it's kind of good, right? Where we're actually the South is electing, you know, Black men to Congress, you know, and where—, the Freedman's Bureau is in there, white confederates or ex-Confederates are really pissed off about this. And this is when we get the formation of the original Klan. And what they're doing is doing this extralegal justice idea where they're going in and they're killing and they're raping and they're doing all sorts of this violence and against Black southerners. And then when reconstruction ends, which, you know, is a whole deal in itself, it shouldn't have ended. But when the federal government pulls out of the South and we get all of these Jim Crow laws, then there really wasn't a need for the Klan, right? Because things went back to the way that they wanted it to be and they had police power. Right? Again. And so the Klan sort of dies down after that. But then in about 1915, it

gets revived. The second Klan is a lot different than the first Klan. The first Klan is just in the South. It's just Democrats, and their campaign is just against Black people. The second Klan is all over the United States. The largest chapter is in Indiana. The second largest chapter is in Denver. It's both men and women. It's Democrats and Republicans. So it is a much larger movement than the first. They're not just anti-Black, they're also anti-Jewish, anti-immigrant, anti-Catholic. They run on this idea of "100% Americanism." Basically what I like to say is they were really—

JVN [00:37:01] The first MAGA?

JACKI ANTONOVICH [00:37:03] I was just going to say that! They were trying to "make America great again," unfortunately.

JVN [00:37:08] Any famous fuckers in that group, is there anyone who was, like, anyone who we would recognize from that 1915 group?

JACKI ANTONOVICH [00:37:15] I will say that there was a film called Birth Of A Nation that came out in 1915, which inspired the revival of the Klan. And this silent film has—, it's all about the Klan, and it paints them as these southern white saviors. And President Wilson, Woodrow Wilson, hosts a viewing of Birth Of A Nation at the White House. So, yeah.

JVN [00:37:40] So, so Woodrow Wilson's, like, racist.

JACKI ANTONOVICH [00:37:43] Yes.

JVN [00:37:44] So basically, like, 1915, everybody's racist. Biggest Klan chapters in Indiana, right next door to where I'm from. So, yeah, everybody's super fucking racist. And then what happens with, like, the reproductive surveillance?

JACKI ANTONOVICH [00:37:55] Right, so my work actually looks at the ways in which the Klan used medicine to kind of "legitimize" themselves, but then also to spread the idea of eugenics. So the Klan was really obsessed with this, this concept that I call "reproductive surveillance." They wanted to really be able to police who was breeding and who wasn't breeding. One great example that I will give is that the head of the Denver Klan was a doctor named John Galen Locke. And he went around and, you know, whipping people if they did things that they weren't supposed to do. One particular incident, he has his henchmen go in and break into a hotel room and kidnap this fellow Klan member because he got a girl pregnant. His henchmen bring this high school kid to his medical office. And Galen comes out with his scalpel and he says, "I'm going to give you a vasectomy right here and now, unless you marry this woman that you got pregnant." And so he starts crying and he says, "Okay, of course I will." And so then they bring in the woman and they bring in a preacher, and then they marry them right then and there.

And so that's an example of the ways in which he was trying to enforce this idea of Klan ideas of Protestant morality. So they were really into policing not only, you know, people of color and keeping them from reproducing, but also making sure that white Protestants were reproducing. They took eugenic ideas. And they argued that one of the—and this is really horrible and I don't even like saying it—but they said, "One of the ways that we could maybe think about using eugenics and using medicine is that whenever a Black man is accused of rape, we should put them on trial with doctors. And doctors should be the jurors. And if we find that they are guilty, then the doctors will give them a vasectomy, or castrate them." Is the way they actually put it. It's just really horrible stuff. But it's really important to realize the ways in which the Klan really weaponized ideas of medicine and reproduction to drive home their agendas.

JVN [00:40:23] So, like, basically whether or not, you know, someone had done it or not, like, one of the first fixes was, like, taking away bodily autonomy and doing forced castration or, like, forced sterilizations of women or, like, forced castration of men.

JACKI ANTONOVICH [00:40:39] Yes.

JVN [00:40:40] So, and the way that the Klan implemented that, how did they implement this whole thing against. I mean, I hear how they did it with their own members but how did they —, and I guess through trials of, like, if anyone was accused of rape or, like—

JACKI ANTONOVICH [00:40:54] Well, that was their idea. Right. So they had all of these ideas that they were writing about and that they were wanting to do. They were thankfully less successful in actually implementing these ideas, but they had big plans. Colorado, for example, and this is what they wanted to do, they basically wanted to take over government, like, state government, and they wanted to kick out like members of public health boards and anything that had to do with medicine and replace them with Klan members. And so Colorado was a great example of this because in the early 1920s elections, Klan members basically take over the state government. They are elected by the people. You know, the governor is a Klan member, the police chief is a Klan member. Almost all of the state representatives are Klan members. The mayor of Denver is a Klan member. They basically take over the government and their idea is that, "Okay, well, now we're going to go to all of these public health boards and these different medical organizations, and we're going to kick out anybody who doesn't, like—, who isn't down with us. And then we're going to replace them with Klan members and then we can implement this widespread reproductive surveillance." So that's their plan. It doesn't come into fruition because they're voted out of office in the next election, thank God. So their actual implementation didn't really happen, but they had big plans, which is scary enough, I think.

JVN [00:42:24 What were the Klan's thoughts on, like, abortion and birth control by choice?

JACKI ANTONOVICH [00:42:28] That is a super big and complicated question. The abortion part, I haven't found any evidence of any Klan members or women, even women. There were a lot of women physicians who were in the Klan, white women physicians. And by and large, all of them were against abortion. And in fact, they tarred and feathered a couple of abortion doctors, the male Klan members did. But the birth control question is a little bit trickier. There were many women in the Klan who were anti-birth control, mainly because they didn't want white women getting their hands on birth control. They didn't want white women aborting babies. They didn't want white women having birth control. They wanted white women to have all the babies. And then their answer to, you know, people of color would be to sterilize them. Right. But not all Klan members were against birth control. And in fact, there were a few women physicians who were members of the Klan and part of Margaret Sanger's Committee Of A Thousand who were campaigning for legalized birth control. Margaret Sanger herself, who was a very complicated figure, met with a group of Klan women to talk about the benefits of birth control. She did say it was the scariest experience of her life.

But, you know, Sanger was really a one-issue woman. She wanted to meet with as many groups as possible to tell them about the wonders of birth control. So she met with Klan women. She met with eugenicists. I think New York's Planned Parenthood, they took down Margaret Sanger's name off of their, you know, their marquee. And I think that's the right decision. We can sort of understand the passion that Margaret Sanger had for birth control. But I don't think that we can actually excuse her meeting with Klan members and eugenicists. One of the other ways in which the Klan women were really instrumental was fostering this idea of Protestant moralism. They would do things, like, there's one particular incident where they were, they were trying to save Protestant babies from Catholic orphanages, so they would adopt Protestant babies out of Catholic orphanages and raise them as Protestants. So they were doing a lot of this sort of domestic stuff to forward their, their agenda. So they weren't necessarily violent. And the ways in which the male Klan was. But they really wielded soft power. Although I will say one of the main women, Klan members who lectured around the country, argued that people who engage in interracial marriage are guilty of race suicide and therefore should be subjected to the death penalty. So, yeah.

JVN [00:45:29] Wow. One thing that I wrote down earlier in my notes is that ultimately, you know, sterilization is tantamount to genocide.

JACKI ANTONOVICH [00:45:38] Yes.

JVN [00:45:39] And you're literally, like trying to erase either eventually, you know, near future an entire group of people based off of your beliefs. And that's something that we, you know, I don't think that we've ever taken responsibility for in the United States or really understand that that's part of our history. We've talked on the show recently about the ways that, like the BMI is based off of, like unreliable metrics and who, like, made those metrics, which it was, like, a lot of like white male doctors who, like, didn't really pool, like, a diverse amount of

people to come up with these things that we like still use as Bible now. So who has historically practiced medicine in the U.S.?

JACKI ANTONOVICH [00:46:24] The short answer to that obviously is white men.

JVN [00:46:27] But you have said, like, some female physicians. So when did, like, women get their right to, like, be able to do–, to be a physician?

JACKI ANTONOVICH [00:47:33] So the very first woman physician was a woman named Elizabeth Blackwell and she earned her medical degree in 1849. So prior to that, prior to 1849, only men were allowed to earn medical degrees. And even Blackwell, when she, you know, decided that she wanted to be a physician, you know, she applied to a bunch of different schools, didn't get in. Finally, there was this college called Geneva Medical College in upstate New York. And she applied and the admissions people said, "Well, this is kind of funny, and you know what we're going to do? We're going to let all of the students decide whether she can enroll." And all of the students sort of thought it was a big joke. Right. So they all voted unanimously to allow her as a joke to be, to, to enroll in the medical college. And then throughout the time when she was there, I mean, she was often ridiculed. And even the people in, in a local town made fun of her. She often would have to sit by herself in labs, but she graduated at the top of her class and became the first woman. And then following her, we get this whole generation of women physicians who follow in her footsteps. We get women's medical colleges that open up across the United States.

And we get, like, a lot of women physicians until around 1920. That's sort of when the year peaks and then it dives down and then those numbers don't recover until beginning in the 1970s. And actually in just the past few years, women have outnumbered men in admissions to medical colleges. And so we do get that big, you know, push of women physicians in the late 19th, early 20th centuries. And interestingly enough, when they become physicians, a lot of men and male physicians didn't really take them seriously. They accused them of being glorified midwives and glorified midwives who were often the people who who performed abortions. So women physicians, because they wanted to gain legitimacy within the field and wanted to distance themselves from midwives and say, “We're nothing like these midwives. We have medical training.” They started to take a very strong anti-abortion stance. So a lot of this early anti-abortion activism that we get is actually from women physicians because they want to make sure that nobody is confusing them with midwives who perform abortions.

JVN [00:49:19] So when you became a doctor in the 1850s, like, you would go to medical school for, like, three, four years and then who, like, granted them—, was there, like, a national, like, medical board or something?

JACKI ANTONOVICH [00:49:32] That's a great question. So I think we automatically think in our modern day ideas of medicine being this super awesome, respected field. Right? But prior to the 20th century, medicine in many ways was ridiculed. It was not really taken that seriously

unless you were, like, a super fancy doctor like Benjamin Rush, who was one of the founders. And that's because training was all over the place. Often you would be an apprentice to an established physician. And that's how you would get your, you know, your, your training. Sometimes you would go to school for just two years. You didn't necessarily need a high school diploma, and it wasn't actually associated with universities. Many physicians who became doctors, like, day one never had any lab training and never even put their hands on a patient. So it was really kind of all over the place, until later when we get this thing called the Flexner Report. Where there was this one guy who goes around to all the medical schools and sort of judges them on, like, how good they are, and then that results in everybody standardizing medical education to the way that we know it now. But really, it was kind of just the Wild West. You can even get your diploma in the mail. You could go to a diploma mill.

JVN [00:50:55] So who did not have access to becoming a physician?

JACKI ANTONOVICH [00:51:00] So, you know, obviously we talked about women. People of color, Black folks, were often excluded from medical schools. The AMA, the American Medical Association, also barred Black doctors. The Flexner Report, which I just talked about, also did a whole section on historically Black colleges that had medical schools. Flexner argued that all of these medical colleges that were at historically Black colleges, they needed to be shut down, all except for two. And he said that because obviously, in his mind, that we needed Black doctors to take care of black patients. And so he, so those recommendations were followed and all black medical colleges were shut down except for the one at Howard and another one at Mary [Holmes College]. And so even, you know, there's this longer history of Black folks fighting to get into, you know, get this through the door.

JVN [00:51:59] So when were Black women allowed to become physicians? Was that not until the sixties?

JACKI ANTONOVICH [00:52:04] So yeah, that's a great question. There were some colleges, so one example that I can think of is the Women's Medical College of Pennsylvania. That college actually allowed Black women to enroll. So what you find is a lot of Black women becoming physicians either at these historically Black medical colleges or at some of these smaller women's medical colleges that actually did allow Black women to become physicians. The very first Black woman physician was a woman named Rebecca Lee Crumpler. And in the 80 she graduated in 1860 from New England's female medical college. So again, at these small women's medical colleges, that also largely disappeared after the Flexner report.

JVN [00:52:51] And when's the Flexner Report come out again?

JACKI ANTONOVICH [00:52:53] It's like the early 1900s.

JVN [00:52:55] So then our guest Sabrina Strings has used art history to explore racialized fatphobia. And you've used film to understand the history of women in medicine. How have women physicians been depicted on screen over time?

JACKI ANTONOVICH [00:53:07] I love this question because, because my research largely focuses on women physicians in the American West, I've always been really fascinated with how Western women physicians sort of appear in film and television. Obviously, when you think about the Western woman physician who–, in film and TV, who do you think of?

JVN [00:53:27] Jane Seymour?

JACKI ANTONOVICH [00:53:28] Yes! Dr. Quinn Medicine Woman. Right? So, like, when I was starting my research, back when I was a graduate student doing my dissertation, every time I would tell people that I was writing about basically white women physicians in the American West, people would always say, "Oh, you must have come up with that idea because you you watched Dr. Quinn." I had never seen it. But I decided to, you know, go ahead and start watching it. Have you seen any of them?

JVN [00:53:55] Some, not intensely, because I was like, "I'd rather watch Golden Girls instead," when I was little.

JACKI ANTONOVICH [00:54:00] Good choice. Good choice. And yeah, so, you know, as I was doing my research, though, I kept coming across different examples as Western women physicians in TV and film. And I was really fascinated by some of the, the change over time that you see the ways in which these women are depicted and how that change over time reflects these larger ideas about gender at the time. And so what I really found was so, like, feminist writers, like, in the early 20th century, like, Charlotte Perkins Gilman and all of these people, they were really obsessed with women physicians in the American West because they were, like, these professional women who could vote, right? Because in the American West, you could vote earlier than the 19th Amendment. So like Colorado, for example, women got the vote in 1893.

JVN [00:54:47] That was before New Zealand!

JACKI ANTONOVICH [00:54:48] Yeah, very early. So, like, feminist writers at the time were obsessed with this. They were like, "Look at these women physicians. They're out there practicing medicine, they're voting, they're running for political office. They're amazing, right?" So they really wrote about these women as, like, the potential of women, like, "Look at these women. They are the feminist potential." Now, on the flip side of this silent film writers, screenwriters were also obsessed with women physicians in the West, but in a very different way. There's tons of films about women physicians in the West, but they depict them as comedic devices that in a way they threaten the sexual order.

So usually, like, the premise of these films is, like, there's this tiny western town in the middle of nowhere, tumbleweeds, you know, everything, and they're all men. And then this woman physician comes in, she moves to the west, she sets out her shingle, and it just causes complete sexual chaos in the town. And all the men want to come and see her because they just want to be touched by a woman. And so there's all of these different variations where the women physician represents sexual chaos. One particular film, which is horrific in a way, is supposed to be a comedy. But from our modern sensibilities, this is terrible. There's a male physician who gets threatened by this woman physician because all the men want to go and see her. But then he decides that he's going to dress up like a woman and be a woman doctor so he can get his patients back. And so he dresses up like a woman. All of his patients start coming back, but then they figure out that he's a man and they decide that they're going to lynch him. And so they start, you know, getting the rope and everything. And then the woman physician comes by and makes all of the men stop and tell them that they are wrong. And the two physicians fall in love and they get married. That's, that's the end of that story.

JVN [00:55:48] It's a little better than the ending I thought was going to happen, to be honest. Wait, so, but then how does it end? Do they–, so then by the eighties, they're like, respected and, like, ass kickers who are, like, awesome and fearless?

JACKI ANTONOVICH [00:57:00] Yeah, yeah. So, like, you get all of these silent films where they're, like, comedies, you know, sex comedies, all of these things. But then after World War Two and we get the rise of the TV, Western women physicians are still there, but they're sort of in the background. They're not the main characters. They're the helpmate to the, to the white male, you know, hero white hat, right?

JVN [00:57:18] The more "real" doctor or whatever.

JACKI ANTONOVICH [00:57:20] Exactly. Yeah, exactly. And but they usually also fall in love with the main character that sort of never goes away. But in the 1980s, when women's history starts to become a thing, we start getting historians who are actually looking at women's history. We get a whole generation of scholarship of women who are like looking at the history of women physicians. And at one end, you also get all of these biographies of women physicians coming out, including a woman named Susan Anderson, who is a woman physician who moves West and she becomes one of the inspirations for Dr. Quinn. In the nineties, by the time we get to Dr. Quinn, Dr. Quinn, in my mind, is really the epitome of what these early 20th century feminists wanted and were writing about. She becomes this white savior, you know, "civilizing" the West in a very problematic way, in my opinion, but in a very sort of multicultural way, right, where you have, you know, she's moralizing from a sort of a second wave feminist perspective, you know, where there's a moral to the end of every story.

JVN [00:58:28] So do we ever see, like, the Klan's involvement in medicine on screen?

JACKI ANTONOVICH [00:58:32] Well, actually, speaking of Dr. Quinn, there's that one episode that I actually write about because I hate it, where the Klan comes to town, to Dr. Quinn's town, and everybody starts joining the Klan and they want to run out the, you know, the town's few Black residents. And Dr. Quinn is the one who comes in and does all of this moralizing where she says, "You all are wrong and the Klan is bad and you should be ashamed of yourselves." And the reason why I take issue with this is because a lot of the women physicians and the American West were actually Klan members. So it paints this sort of white savior trope.

JVN [00:59:23] And she would've been run the fuck out of town, like, her character would really have done that in the late 1800s. Like if that had really happened, like they would have run her out of town too. For, like, and she would have been declared, like, feeble minded and, like, institutionalized for trying to, like, stand up for the Black people, right?

JACKI ANTONOVICH [00:59:38] Exactly. Exactly. Exactly. I mean, you know, history tells us that Dr. Quinn more than likely would have been a Klan member rather than fight the Klan. That would be historically more accurate.

JVN [00:59:50] So what other archives, like, kind of prominently feature women physicians, if anyone–, well, actually, cause, here's the thing. I am, I'm not even two thirds of the way through our interview. And this is definitely going to have to be a two-parter. So, like, that's kind of what I learned about this. But in the meantime, until we have our second installment, where can people find your scholarship and your work? And where do you think people really need to start to kind of understand how race, gender, class, privilege, and the history of all of those things intersect to understand, like, the history of reproductive justice and autonomy, freedom in the United States. Like, where can people start until next time?

JACKI ANTONOVICH [01:00:26] Yes, great question. So, you know, I have a book that I'm working on through Rutgers University Press that I'm supposed to be submitting next year, next May. So stay tuned for that. But I also have an article called "White Coats, White Hoods: The Medical Politics of the Ku Klux Klan" through The Bulletin of the History of Medicine, which is, I think there is an open access version. But more importantly, I'm looking at my work. There is a whole important body of scholarship by Black women. Deirdre Cooper Owens' Medical Bondage that looks at the ways in which Black enslaved women were experimented on by white physicians. Dorothy Roberts' book Killing the Black Body. There's so much great scholarship out there that people can look for. And to me, that's the key to moving forward. We have to stop whitewashing the history of medicine and as this sort of great arc of progress and really look at the ways in which medicine has contributed to, you know, medical violence against marginalized communities. That's the only way, I think, that we can move forward.

JVN [01:01:33] Ah! Professor Jacki Antonovich, thank you so much for coming on Getting Curious. We are going to have you back again very shortly. I'm so proud of you. It's, like, a

weird thing to say at the end but I am just so proud of you and your work in your scholarship and thank you so much for talking to us. We appreciate you so much.

JACKI ANTONOVICH [01:01:47] Oh, thank you so much for having me. This has been really fun.

JVN [01:01:52] You've been listening to Getting Curious with me, Jonathan Van Ness. Our guest this week was Dr. Jacki Antonovich. You'll find links to her work in the episode description of whatever you're listening to the show on. Our theme music is "Freak" by QUIÑ, thank you so much to her for letting us use it. If you enjoyed our show, introduce a friend and please show them how to subscribe! [SINGING] You can follow us on Instagram and Twitter @CuriousWithJVN. Our socials are run and curated by Middle Seat Digital. Our editor is Andrew Carson and Getting Curious is produced– oh wait! Getting Curious is produced by me, Erica Getto, and Zahra Crim. Yeah! [SINGING STOPS] See ya next week.