John

Hello, welcome to New Books Network. I'm John Rimenta and I'll be your host for this episode. Today I'm here with Dr. Robin James, author of the new book, Good Vibes Only, Phenomenology and the Biotech. Okay, take two. I thought I was going to screw up on phenomenology and it was biopolitics. Okay, let's try that again.

Welcome to New Books Network. I'm John Armenta and I'll be your host for this episode. Today I'm here with Dr. Robin James, author of the new book, "Good Vibes Only: Phenomenology and the Biopolitics of Algorithmic Legitimation," out on November 17th from Duke University Press. Dr. James is a philosopher, formerly a tenured professor at University of North Carolina, Charlotte, now an independent scholar and editor. Her work sits at the intersections of continental feminist philosophy, critical philosophy of race, and popular music studies. In "Good Vibes Only," Dr. James uses these different theoretical perspectives and associated methodologies to walk the reader through this problem of how vibes function as a means of categorization and control. Robin, welcome to New Books Network.

Robin

Hi, thanks for having me.

John

All right, so before we get started, could you please introduce yourself and tell us how you came to write this book?

Robin

Sure. So I guess I have sort of a weird disciplinary background. I'm trained as a continental philosopher. My background is really in feminist philosophical aesthetics, the critical philosophy of race. My dissertation back in the early 2000s is kind of what I would say would be like a philosophical unpacking of poptimism. Right. So I've been kind of working in that intersection of philosophy and popular music for, 20 some years. And after finishing one book, I've been reading about sort of the kinds of probabilities, the kinds of math used in things like contemporary finance in recommender I was particularly interested in recommender algorithms, right? Because as a popular music studies person, that's what Spotify and TikTok are all doing. And I realized that the mathematical models that these technical systems are using are analogs for what I saw on Instagram and then Twitter, when people were posting about vibes, like people were creating the same kinds of models with pictures on social media that these technical processes were creating when they were crunching data. So when I realized that, I was like, oh, right? Vibes are how we have learned to see ourselves, the way the

technologies that we're interacting with on platforms, facial recognition, TSA, stuff like that. That's how they see us. And as someone trained in continental feminist philosophy, I'm kind of a Foucault girl. So this model of biopower, right, which has both quantitative and qualitative aspects seem like a natural model to talk about. Here are qualitative and quantitative analogs of the same kind of object of knowledge and governance, and here's how they work together. So that's kind of why I went to biopower for this.

John

Yeah, Great, thank you. So early on in the book, you state that this is a follow-up to your 2019 book, "The Sonic Episteme." For anyone who hasn't read it, including myself, can you please give us a brief overview and how that led to this particular project?

Robin

Sure. So that book kind of began from a reading of a text that's kind of famous in sound studies and popular music studies, which is Jacques Attali. He was a French economist slash philosopher. He was in Mitterrand's cabinet. Yeah. He wrote a book in the late 70s. Brian Massumi translated it in 1984. It's called "Noise, A Political Economy of Music." And in that book, he argues that the approach to chance used by avant-garde composers like John Cage is the same approach to chance that the very same French neoliberal economists that Foucault talks about in which book, The Birth of Biopolitics, right? The very same idea of chance that those economists were working with. So he's saying like John Cage, French neoliberal economists have the same approach to chance. And I was like, that's an interesting claim. What does that mean? And so I, you know, this is this was when people were talking about things like big data, right? 2016, 17, something like that. And big data analytics companies would name themselves things like Symphony Systems, right? So people were using this idea of resonance to speak to how mathematical models were working. And I was like, oh, this really seems to be similar to Attali's claim that there's something here going on between mid-century avant-garde composition and neoliberal economic models. So that book argues that kind of across sectors from I look at new materialist theory and the use of like Deleuze and music and resonance and vibration in that kind of body of theory. I look to popular science writing, I look to, what else do I talk about in that book? I want to talk about Attali himself, but sort of kind of a, across culture and academic theory, there are people using this figure of acoustic resonance or vibration, presenting it as somehow a progress path, like theories of representation or, you know, sort of verbal expression, right? You know, new materialism is all about like, we're leaving behind Judith Butler and language and we're doing vibration. And I argue that seems progressive, but all that's really doing is it's using sound supposedly different from language or words to represent neoliberal upgrades to the same kind of patriarchal racial capitalist hierarchies that, you know, we have found traditionally in things like, you know, language or

representations or things like that. So it's really, you know, sort of sound functions as an analog, like a qualitative analog for those same mathematical models that neoliberal economists were using in the 70s, right? And so Foucault's original theory of biopower was really informative of that book.

But that was the 70s. That's, and I'm going to make myself feel old now, that was 50 years ago. The math has changed a lot since then. right? And so one of the things I was doing when I was finishing up that book was sort of reading up on, well, how has the math changed since the 70s? So I was looking at people like Justin Joque's Revolutionary Mathematics. Louise Amoore's work has been very helpful as well, because I tell people, the last time I took a math class, Kurt Cobain was alive. So I really rely a lot on people doing really helpful work. Like I think Joke and Amor are really helpful, kind of explaining how math works to humanists like me. And I realized that, yeah, OK, the math has changed in certain ways. Instead of a normal curve, like the bell curve, that was the original object of knowledge that Foucault's talking about in 19th century normative biopower. This is like round one Francis Galton eugenics. Charles Murphy, the bell curve. So that's the old probability model. These new probability models that things like recommender systems and machine learning systems are using don't create a normal curve. They create, they kind of infer trajectories from collections of data, right? So some use vector-based models that are like lines pointing in a particular direction. Amoore talks about probability density models that kind of, she uses the metaphor of a cloud chamber, they kind of condense the data by like fiddling with the resolution to see like, you know, if you zoom really far out or zoom really far in, what can you infer like a line or a pattern or something like this? So that's a different kind of mathematical object than a bell curve. So I had been reading that and then I was like, ‘oh, vibes are vibe posts on social media are creating these same kind of like clusters of images that point in a particular direction,’ if that makes sense. So that's kind of how I got from *The Sonic Episteme*, which was sort of saying like, there's vibration, right? Like frequency, that's the frequency is a qualitative model for the bell curve, basically, because that's what bell curves are, right? They're a peak in a valley. So that's that book.

But the new book, *Good Vibes Only*, says, okay, like that was sort of talking about like the 70s and 80s. In the 2020s, the math is different. So the discursive side of biopower is also different. The sort of discursive complement to, you know, sort of the vector-based or density-based probabilities used in these technical systems would be something like the vibe. And so I argue that they're both as a philosopher, the way that I would understand both of these models is as a phenomenological orientation, right? So I use Sarah Ahmed's theory of orientation as sort of a tendency towards some things and away from others, right? Sometimes phenomenologists even literally sort of talk about a horizon line, right? Like if you've ever done those, like an elementary school art

class where you sort of have the the sort of line in the middle of the paper and then the horizon lines to help you draw like buildings and a city skyline to create perspective. Yeah, so I use phenomenology's theory of orientation as a sort of umbrella category for both these technical practices of building probabilities out of data sets and then the sort of vernacular practices of constructing something like a vibe, either when you're like, you know, putting a cluster of images together on an Instagram post to be like weekend vibes or building a playlist on Spotify to be like chill vibes, right? So it's the concept of the phenomenological orientation is a philosophical concept that could kind of give us a unifying conceptual structure to talk about the qualitative and quantitative dimensions of this new form of knowing and governing people.

John

Okay, yeah, we're gonna come back to a lot of that. Because it's, if I throw out the book, it keeps bubbling up again and again. So yeah, and I definitely want to talk about kind of almost where you left off about vibes being as a newer form of producing knowledge and categorizing things. But before we get there, just some kind of table setting things. For the non-philosophers out there, what is phenomenology? And then also how do you use it as a philosopher?

Robin

That's a good question. I would say like if I was teaching an Intro to Philosophy class, I would say phenomenology is a tradition of European, mostly European philosophy that comes out of German idealism. So like think Immanuel Kant, right? So like 18th century German philosophy. The first text that's largely seen to use the word phenomenology would be Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, right? And that's a study of consciousness, right? Because spirit is the English translation of the word *geist*, which could mean things like mind or consciousness or something like that. So typically phenomenology is seen as philosophizing from the perspective of human consciousness, right? Like Husserl is another sort of very well-known foundational phenomenologist. And he sort of talks, you know, he's famous for talking about the bracket, right? And just sort of focusing on perceptual reality. My sort of where I would locate myself in the broader world of phenomenology is I consider myself an existential phenomenologist, right? So this would be like Beauvoir, Sartre, Fanon, right? So that sort of post-war French kind of Marxist also version of phenomenology that takes some of phenomenology's tools, but kind of gets rid of all the metaphysical woo-woo, right? Because I mean, these are existentialists. They say like existence is essence, right? We're materialists also in a way, both in the sort of sense of dialectical materialism, but also in the, Marx is also dialectical materialist, right? So someone like Beauvoir or Fanon would say, you know, human reality is all there is, right? And we are phenomenologists insofar as we are studying human reality, human existence. There's no like metaphysical stuff up here

that's unseen like Plato would talk about, right? So yeah, sort of existential phenomenology would really be kind of where I locate my own perspective and that's the perspective that this book takes, right? It's sort of looking at human experience as, you know, the main stuff of reality.

John

Thank you. And the material in this book, all the different examples and case studies. It's a broad range of examples of individual songs, but then also of music streaming platforms to internet culture more broadly, to government action. So all these different layers. So how did you select these examples or these case studies for this text?

Robin

Yeah, that's a good question. And I think it'll go back to the reason why I decided to get my PhD in philosophy and not something else is because as a philosopher, I can talk about all of it. Right? So my training is not in a particular medium or discipline in the sense of like media discipline or politics or whatever, but like as philosophers, we like to think systematically, right? And I can kind of see something systematic emerging in my own thinking right from *The Sonic Episteme* to this, but I'm really you know, I chose all those examples because they, to me, were examples of this broader sort of epistemic and governmental phenomenon, right, that pervades society. There's a lot of popular music studies in there just because that's what I am most familiar with. And I kind of have the, you know, scholarly background to talk about it as well. But part of what interests me is how these mediated practices, right? Because both vibes and, obviously AI recommender systems, those are media as well, right? But how did these mediated practices both express sort of more abstract structures, but also how did they kind of just manifest in the world? So it was Yeah, I think maybe that's my prerogative as a philosopher is I can talk about it all.

John

Yeah, no, that's a good answer. I pick these examples because I wanted to. Or I guess maybe more in the spirit of the book, well, they all vibe together.

Robin

Yes, yeah, for sure.

John

So on that note is like, what is just like your brief definition of vibes or what a vibe is.

Robin

Yeah, so and I'll kind of go back to this idea of phenomenological orientation. So Sarah Ahmed said that says that like we are and this is again sort of maybe think of like the existentialism, right? Like we exist in a world and there's stuff around us and we shape our world and we are shaped by it. So like to be, I was born in Ohio in the 90s. So that means, I personally do not find Cincinnati Chili weird, right? Or I grew up listening to stuff like The Breeders or the Afghan wigs rather than like emo, right? Because I'm young Gen. X, right? Whereas if I was 10 years younger, emo would be more my things, right? So I'm oriented by the things around me that points me towards some possibilities more than others, right? So vibes are precisely these kinds of tendencies or positionings, right? Beauvoir would use the term situatedness, right? It's sort of because of your material conditions and histories, some things are nearer to you and some things are further away, right? So for example, as a cis woman, using the bathroom in a public place is much easier for me and less fraught than it is for my wife who is trans, right? So that would be an example of what I'm talking about, like in terms of orientation or tendency or something like that. And vibes are those things. right? Vibes are kind of orientations. So like chill could be a vibe or, people talk about workout vibes or, kind of anything can be a vibe. But I would say the main thing that I think is perhaps distinctive to my understanding of vibe is that it, again, these sort of tendencies or orientations are not themselves something so concrete as a style or a genre. if that makes sense, right? So in the book, I talk about chill playlists and I look at some of Spotify's chill playlists and what was really funny about some of them and they've changed now because they're all generally just like AI generated covers of stuff. But in the pre 2022 world, the chill playlists were interesting because they had kind of genres that you wouldn't expect to be together, right? You'd have like Madonna, and Ryuichi Sakamoto, who's like a Japanese kind of avant-garde electronic musician, and the Neville Brothers, and I don't know what, but just like genres that you would never even think would be close together, but they, what the playlist would do is it would take the most toned down version of, you know, R&B or piano jazz or 80s pop, right? And that toned down profile was the thing that all of these songs shared as a vibe. So yeah, I guess another way to think of a vibe would be something like a profile in the sense of like a, like a police profile or, right? So how when police profile potential criminals, right, they're looking more at, they're using the sort of bits of data that they know about like the scene of the crime, the pattern in crimes to find future tendencies, right? Like where is this person going to hit next? Something like that. That's also how like recommender systems think like what tendency, what's your line of desire or habit? So we want to know what you what you want to buy next, what you want to listen to next. So yeah, a vibe is that sort of orientation or tendency or profile that comes from your material situation that is not, like I said, it's not itself so specific to be like a style or a genre, but it makes some genres or styles more available than others, right? Like another example I use of a vibe is liminal space, right? That sort of internet aesthetic of liminal space. Because if you look at the

aesthetics wiki and kind of all the images they have there of liminal spaces, any space can be liminal, right? So long as it's like empty of people and maybe there's lights on, but it's otherwise dark, right? So again, you can slot in any kind of stylistic features you want as long as all those stylistic features fit in that like outline or profile, if that makes sense.

John

Yeah. Yes, it does. And but I want to continue this a bit because there's also a spatial dimension to this idea of orientation. Like 'I am orienting myself in this direction because I need to get to the bus stop.' Or you were talking earlier about horizons, again, very, very much a spatial orientation. But how does that fit in to understanding and thinking about vibes? And then I think this is also a place we can get back into talking about, theories of power. Like this is because it's a lot more complicated to understand things spatially as opposed to a bar graph or a, the the frequencies or resonances, but we have the computing power to do it now. So I'll just, yeah, I guess the question is, how does the spatial aspect get into understanding vibes?

Robin

Yeah, and I'm going to go from the sort of pop culture side of the project to the mathematical side of the project, because there's some really great work by the anthropology, he's a sort of anthropologist of technology is how I describe him. Nick Seaver, he's at Tufts. His book *Computing Taste* is from his field work where he was embedded in California and all the sort of streaming platform offices. And so he talks to a lot of the coders that are kind of working on recommender algorithms and learns a lot about the math. And he has this article that he wrote called "Everything is in Space," which is a quote that one of his research subjects gave him because the math that they're using comes from what's called multi-dimensional scaling, which a way of sort of spatially modeling mathematical data. So yeah, one of the differences that I talk about in the book is that frequencies are very temporal, right? It's, you know, the period, the up and down, the peak in the valley happens over time. Right? And if the sort of older model of mathematical probability, right, the Gaussian probability is frequential, and it's more about time. The stuff that comes from multi-dimensional multi-dimensional scaling is more spatial, right? So, like Seaver has some graphs of like how I think it was maybe like was it Spotify or the music genome project or something mapped a user's taste, right? And it was all these sort of distorted lines, right? So, it was a spatial representation of likeness or unlikeness, right? So, to be probable is to be near. Basically, that's how this mathematical model understands probability. To be probable is to be near, right? So like data points that are closest to this like line in space, that's more probable than data points that are that are other over over here, right? So one of the examples I talk about in the book is how, because not only this is a book about

biopower, but I'm talking a lot about like stuff that doesn't seem very like flesh and blood, right? But in the US, in the 2020s, your zip code is more predictive of life and health chances than your DNA. Right? So that's a spatial thing, but that's also obviously in the US where you live is 100% socioeconomic. right? So life chances, I argue, are really, they come down to a property relation in the end, right? The zip code versus DNA example sort of renders that sort of class relation as a relation in space because that's what like real estate does in the US. But I'm kind of, I guess, going a bit down, pointing us towards the power analysis here, but I'll kind of stop and maybe let you comment, ask another question.

John

I was just having this conversation with some students last week about like zip code is the best predictor of college success.

Robin

Yep.

John

SATs are only the second best. I really like how you, where you're going with this. And they, and they it's, but I'm also like frequencies, like you said, are temporal, but they're also regular, like the sine wave that they flow on, but the vibes are not, like these other, these orientations or the densities are not necessarily regular and, get harder to map onto, just, an XY graph or something like that.

Robin

Well, yeah, and that's a great example of how sort of the older model with things like normativity, right? Like sexual normativity, gender norms, stuff like that. There was like a single standard and you either met the norm or you deviated from it. But in our world where, you know, the head of the Proud Boys can be a Latino man, right? We're sort of in a in a state where things have been scrambled, right? There's no single standard. You can be whatever you want as long as the, how do I put it in the book? As long as whatever happens through you continues the sort of alignment of patriarchal racial capitalist property relations into speculative reality. So like, sure, you can be a Latino man and head a white supremacist organization because that furthers the ends of white supremacy. right? You can be Usha Vance, right? You could be, you know, Sophie Lewis has that *Enemy Feminisms* book. You know, it doesn't, right? So vibes, it doesn't matter, again, and this goes back to that claim, it doesn't matter what the stylistic determinations are in that profile so long as they follow the profile. So part of what's getting updated here is for a sort of world where we're not sort of rigidly policing things like identities and the normativity of identities, right? You can be whomever you want as

long as what happens through you is aligned with the sort of broader structural ends of power.

John

Yeah, well, that's, I think this is a great place to kind of shift a bit. So, you know, talk more about how, this functions as biopower. So they, and in particular, you talk about legitimating biopower. And so, but before we get to that intervention, kind of maybe you could set up, the older form, the regulatory biopower that you talk about with, in terms of like Foucault and then how then your idea of the legitimating biopower?

Robin

So many people will probably be familiar with the sort of traditional Foucauldian narrative. It's sort of, I think the most famous place he talks about this is in the last chapter of the *History of Sexuality, Volume 1*, where he says, okay, so there's a power that centers on life is a normative power, right? And there's two kinds of norms. There's disciplinary norms, right, which would be like, you know, Students at their desks must stand up straight. Women must be blonde, right? The sort of idea here is the single standard and you should not deviate from it, right? And that's, you know, it's also what Judith Butler's talking about in *Gender Trouble* in terms of the norm is iterative. Every time you like walk down the street, you can walk in a feminine or a masculine way. And in so doing, you're sort of reinforcing or not reinforcing that single standard, right? So disciplinary norms would be, they're sort of enforced, not officially, right? So this is where I like to read Foucault alongside John Stewart Mills on John Stewart and Harriet Taylor Mills, new information. Yeah, so the Mills's *On Liberty* where they say, okay, so the law can govern individuals to a limited extent, but private opinion can do whatever it wants, right? And norms function in that realm of private opinion, right? Like the law can't censor your ability to tell jokes, but if I don't like the jokes you say, I don't have to invite you to my party, right? So norms function in that sort of private sphere. These sorts of norms about things like shame are precisely what people like Femi Táíwò were talking about and ideas of like vice signaling on the right and we need to bring back shame, things like that. Yeah, and the whole point of these disciplinary norms is that they're more efficient because we internalize them, right? I start to police myself for, 'do I look too masculine? do I need to pluck my hairs on my,' right? So we police ourselves. So that's the disciplinary norm. And that's qualitative. It's discursive. It's definitely sort of vernacular in the culture. On the other hand, there's this mathematical form of governance that gets invented across the 19th century, but really kind of takes off in the late 19th century once we really have social statistics, right? So we can measure things like birth rate, death rate, morbidity and mortality rates, crime rates, stuff like that, right? And they're all modeled on that bell curve, right? And so what happens is we have this data about a population, right? So disciplinary norms are individual, regulatory norms,

basically use math to govern a population and measure sort of the average rate of risk in a population. And you sort of decide like, this is the most optimal rate of risk for crime and we're not going to get rid of crime, but we're just going to try to keep it within this range, right? So that's the old model.

The new model preserves the sort of overarching structure, right? There's qualitative and quantitative analogs for one another. But yeah, the kind of the contents and the shape of that object changes, right? So the vibes would be the analog to the disciplinary norm. And, you know, the math behind recommender systems, LLMs would be the analog to the bell curve. But instead of identifying like a single standard identifying a single standard to which everyone must conform or maintaining, that sort of rate across a population. What this new form of biopower does is it polices lineages, right? Specifically lineages of wealth. So I look to, so Sarah Ahmed talks a lot in queer phenomenology about debt and the function of debt in sort of maintaining or not maintaining orientations. So I argue what we're seeing now is instead of things being policed for their normativity, they're being policed for their perceived capacity to carry basically the orientation of private property, right, which would be the sort of patriarchal racial capitalist distribution of wealth into speculative realities or realities that don't exist yet, right? So for example, on Blue Sky, was it earlier this week, people were talking about the sort of moral panic around children, adult children cutting off their parents, right? In the book, I talk about how a couple years ago there was another sort of moral panic about childless millennials. right? So these moral panics are sort of obviously about lineage, right, in the sort of direct way of like familial lineage. But you also see this form of governance. I work out of Manhattan, so I kind of keep up with New York news. And in 2024, the New York State Governor, Kathy Hochul, sent the National Guard to the MTA to the subway, despite crime statistics showing that crime was down. Right? So here's an example where the old traditional form of like regulatory normation, right? We're looking at crime rates. She literally says, I don't care about statistics. I care about how people feel. Right? So, you know, the statistics shows that like you don't need more cops, but what, you know, what power wants is always more cops. So when statistics don't let you do that, you just go to vibes. If that makes sense.

John

Oh yeah, trying to talk with students about things like crime rate versus how it's portrayed in the media. If you watch Fox News, you would think this is the deadliest country in the world.

Robin

Yeah, Or the shoplifting panic from, was it a couple years ago that just makes it impossible to shop at the drugstore anymore. That was also complete, like evidence has now shown that was completely fabricated. Right. And again, it's another example

of the stats say one thing, but we want more policing. So we'll just create a vibe to facilitate that.

John

And on top of that, I think it was in San Francisco, I think it was like Walgreens, like they had planned for years to shutter, like a half dozen stores in San Francisco, but they did it at the time of this so-called shoplifting spree and they blamed that, even though they had planned it for, like months or years prior. But it was a better story for them as opposed to, no, this is just basic corporate restructuring.

Robin

Yeah.

John

All right. Okay. So, now, what is, let's continue that, but you talk about legitimating biopower. What is that doing? What is the legitimating part to biopower?

Robin

Sure. So legitimating is a term, or the language of legitimation is a term I get from Melinda Cooper, right, where she talks about how, and this is in her book, *Family Values*, right, which sort of argues that if you look from the 90s onward, what we see actually is both neoconservatives and neoliberals agreeing on the role of private responsibility in governance, right, private family responsibility. So in that book, she talks about how with, you know, advocacy for gay marriage kind of becoming the main organizing point for LGBTQ activism, mainstream LGBTQ activism in the early 2000s, what this has done is it has created a situation where the main sort of, I guess you would sort of say line, right, that sort of like these are people who are protected by privilege and these are people who aren't, is not object choice, but your access to familial wealth. right? So, and that's kind of what gay marriage is, right? It's about sort of the, literally the transfer of assets, right? Marriage is a thing that disproportionately benefits white people, educated people, right? Because it facilitates that asset transfer. And she even shows how the shift towards marriage activism occurred basically as soon as white gay men got access to credit, from banks, right? So she talks about that as legitimation because marriage, like the function of marriage, legally, is to legitimate the intergenerational transfer of wealth and assets, right? Such that, if my kids inherit from me, that's legitimate, but if my dog does, right? So it's a structure that governs the transfer of wealth and property into the future. So my friend Ed Kazarian said, well, no, you're actually talking about lineage. And I'm like, that's a much better way of talking about it, because it also sort of plays into this idea of orientation or horizon as a line kind of continuing into the future. So when I'm talking about legitimation, I mean something

like, so like with AI, a hallucinated result is the same, like technically on the back end as any other result. It's just that results look like they're hallucinated when they're not aligned with our pre-existing biases, but they look like objective results when they are aligned with our pre-existing biases, right? So something that that shares that alignment with our existing biases, carries those biases into future realities. Like that's what predictive policing does. That's what facial recognition does, right? It sort of takes all of society's pre-existing biases, which are biases about race, gender, wealth, property, all of that, and sort of continues making reality as one where those existing distributions of property and personhood stay the same, if that makes sense.

John

Yeah. No, and maybe to kind of pull this apart a little more is jump into kind of like, yeah, I'm. just going back and forth in your book, is to the 4th chapter, which is, that you talk, I think, most specifically about the lineages in popular music as this form of legitimating biopower. So maybe talk through some of the examples you use about, in that chapter and how we can see these lineages in action as a form of power.

Robin

Yeah. So this is maybe the one chapter that's really deeply about music, but as an example of the sort of functioning of the logic of legitimation or lineage. So I look to kind of, I guess, maybe the last 100 or so years of African American popular music and this sort of play between radical aesthetics and their appropriation. Right. So I start with Dale Chapman's amazing book, *The Jazz Bubble*, which is about sort of the neoliberalization of jazz. And he talks about how Dexter Gordon, so Dexter Gordon was a, you know, sort of 50s bebop player. There was in the 70s, there was this like revival. He became cool. It was his 20 year trend cycle, right? But the language around the sort of Dexter Gordon revival framed him as sort of the legit… (Internet connectivity problem resulted in the loss of about 15 seconds of Robin's response.)

It's this sort of pure American, but also masculine, right? Like there's lots of press coverage that Chapman digs up that sort of talks about how Gordon, he's a black man, but he is represented as the sort of legitimate patriarch, right? Truly masculine, an American, not like people who use disco or Latin American influences in their jazz, right? It's the sort of pure masculine intellectual or creative tradition from the 50s forward to the 70s, right? So you're saying it's free from these queer and foreign influences, right? And that's what makes it like legitimate and American. So so there's that appropriation of what was a black radical aesthetic as something that then, fits patriarchal racial capitalist narratives about property and personhood. To the point that like, there's a clip I talk about in the book that Wynton Marsalis quotes John Locke in a positive way. Right? So that's kind of what I'm talking about there too. So then that's kind of one moment. And then I fast forward a little bit to Lester Spence's work. So

Lester Spence is a political scientist who writes about hip hop and neoliberalism. And I look at his discussion of Ace Hood's “Hustle Hard,” right. Where, so this comes out in the mid to late 2000s, which is precisely at the moment when Nicki Minaj is breaking through as kind of a not just a woman rapper, but like a woman rapper who crosses over to pop. Right? So Ace Hood uses very like sort of straightforwardly hip hop sounds, not pop sounds, to talk about private family responsibility. He takes care of his women, he takes care of his kid, he has his personal responsibility, he's hustling, right, kind of embodying the neoliberal patriarch. right? The sort of private family responsibility, private individual responsibility. So again, you get, you know, aesthetics that emerged in Black radical contexts appropriated to dominant narratives, right? Through figures of patriarchal legitimate, like patriarchal masculinity, as the case with Dexter Gordon. Fast forward a little bit more recently to Beyoncé, who's a little bit more complicated of a figure. I look at Emily Lordi's work and how she talks about Beyoncé on the one hand embodies the same sort of hustle narrative about private responsibility, but also pushes back against that a little bit.

So again, what I'm kind of tracing in each moment is how there's no technique or style or practice that is inherently anti legitimating that like anything can be appropriated. Anything can be legitimated. Right? So the the solution that chapter is really sort of me kind of working through and demonstrating it like. So I've raised this problem in the first part of the book. This is the bad thing. What's the alternative? Right? What's the alternative? Well, people have tried to find alternatives, but they have consistently been reappropriated. So then, so then what's what's the solution? And that's kind of chapter 5. But yeah, so I think just sort of the role of property, the figure of the patriarch, patriarchal masculinity in those music examples really sort of shows how this is, how legitimation literally is about lineage in even the most like obvious trite examples of lineage, right? But lineage also functions more abstractly in the ways that I talk about in the book.

John

Yeah. Thank you. And I do want to get to some of the solutions or ways out of it. But let's back up in terms of the text a bit and talk a bit. about the connection between, I really am jumping around all here, norms and legitimacy. And so in chapter 3, you have the examples of moral panics about sex from the past as compared to the contemporary moral panics about queer and trans people. So what is, are they, how are they different? or actually say how is the contemporary example so different from the previous ones?

Robin

Yeah, So that chapter, I talk about how demonization and criminalization are the practices that basically construct certain populations as inherently not legitimate, right? So we used to have sort of the abnormals or deviants, right? That was the old model.

But instead of abnormality or deviance, we have criminalization and demonization, right? So the moral panics of the 80s, right, like the satanic panic or, the PMRC, the Tipper Gore's Parents Music Resource Council, like all of that, was about deviance or anti-normativity. The moral panics about mostly queer people today frame them, they criminalize them, right? So if you think about a lot of the bathroom bills, that's precisely what the bathroom bills do is they treat being trans in public as inherently a crime, right? You can't, you know, if you use the bathroom, you're breaking the law. or the stuff about some of the bills attempting to ban drag shows. I think in the last year or so since immigration has really come to the fore as sort of one of the most spectacularly violent exercises of power in the US, it's also about sort of constructing black and brown people as just sort of inherently illegal or criminal, right? ICE is just arresting people for literally having the wrong vibe, right? On the pretext that they are criminals, right? So yeah, I would say criminality or, so I use Lisa Kasho, she's a sociologist. She wrote about criminalization as a phenomenon. And she has this example in her book where she says, a lot of the coverage of African American people in the wake of Katrina who were just trying to get food, frame them as looters, right? So criminalization is when you are judged based on who you are, not on what your actions are, right? Because in that case, it was like people were judged based on their race. I mean, that's what's going on with ICE today, right now. Criminalization shares a lot with what political theologian Adam Kotsko has identified as the sort of Christian tradition of demonization, right? So that's, he kind of, I'm not a theologian at all, but he very helpfully kind of goes back and says, okay, so in Christian theology we have this practice of, again, treating people as inherently in violation of some law based not on what they have done, but based on who they are. Right? So that's that's that sort of structure that I see as the kind of main mechanism for policing. You don't count. We must contain or eliminate or deport you. Yeah. So it's not that you're deviant or abnormal. It's that you are criminalized. Right.

John

So I was just listening to another New Books Network podcast. I was Eleanor Johnson and *Monstrous ***** A History of Terrifying Women*. And it's exactly this problem is these women being categorize as demons or, selling their soul to the devil or whatever. And but of course, obviously that doesn't happen, that they. They never did it because nobody ever does that. But it is a useful category for getting, pushing aside women who are getting in the way of, and in the case the author was talking about, interfering, they're either being hypersexual or they're accused of killing babies, you know, all these awful things. But again, there's no such, actual thing going on. It's just a useful category to get them out of the to justify their demonization or criminalization. Yeah. So this is a. What I, getting back to your book, what I really think about is how are you moving through these different examples? So in this chapter, it's when talking about the criminalization of queer and trans people, it's you then transition to the issue of genre,

which is another way of classifying and categorizing things. And you connect it to the example of these genre-less playlists, getting back to an example that you talked about earlier. And maybe actually, before I ask my question, can you, for the listener, explain really quickly about how these genre-less lists work?

Robin

Yeah. Liz Pelly also talks about this in her *Mood Machine* book, right? There was a move late 2010s at Spotify in particular, but kind of sort of across streaming in general to categorize music by mood or vibe or activity rather than by genre. So genre literally emerged in the music industry in the 20th century as a racial categorization. There was hillbilly music, there was popular music, and then there was race records. So genre very explicitly has this identity-based baggage. And so streaming platforms sold these mood, vibe, or activity-based playlists as somehow overcoming the old racist baggage of genre, but what I show in the book is that it just remakes those racial divisions, those gender divisions in different ways.

John

Yeah, and I just, thinking about this, and because you go into a little more depth in the book is like, I could see, one of the proponents of this, saying that's like, We're not trying to classify people based on who they are. We're only distinguishing based on revealed preferences. And I would guess that somebody who is talking about the, or like the predictive policing example you're using is like, oh, we're not, it's not identity, it's behavior. So what's wrong with that claim? What's wrong with the people who support that?

Robin

We always judge behavior through identity. And that's what criminalization, that's what the theory of criminalization really is, is that we're claiming to judge people based on their behavior, but it's really an identity based decision. So for example, and again, this is looking to some of Nick Seaver's work on, you know, the programmers behind all these platforms. He shows how they frame the ideal listener in terms of behavior, right? In terms of wanting to discover new and different music. But then, when he talks to them, they say, teen girls don't like to do that. Right? And teen girls have always been in popular music, like the paradigmatic example of like bad listening or immature or just like too capitalist or whatever, right? So it's literally the same hierarchy of listener that you get in Adorno remade by Tech Bros.

John

Or even thinking about when The Beatles transitioned from being a boy band to more intellectual rock with *Rubber Soul* or somewhere around there. It's like, it's the same guys, like, and if you listen to those early records, it was all there already too.

All right, so let's get back to phenomenology and because you talk about how so in order to study vibes, you need a phenomenological method set, or at least a phenomenological way of thinking about things. But that's also how vibes themselves are created. It's about feeling. But then you also say phenomenology is kind of like the way to get out of this. So maybe you can unpack that a bit. And it's like, how is phenomenology both the problem and the solution maybe?

Robin

Yeah. At least it's a way out of it for me. Right? So for me, the real issue is legitimation or criminalization or whatever as a mode of policing. Like how do we Because I don't think the problem is with the practice of thinking in terms of vibes. Like that's inherently nothing, right? It's the fact that we think this way in a context of patriarchal racial capitalism and the sort of policing of that. So I was like, okay, what's some kind of alternative to legitimation or policing or something like that? So I was like, oh, existentialism. Right? Existentialism is, it emerges from phenomenology, it thinks in those terms of like orientations and situation and stuff like that, but explicitly in a context where there are no, nothing is more, no value is more legitimate than any other, right? Like that's the whole like shtick with existentialism. Like any undergraduate who's taken a class kind of knows that, right? So I look to Simone de Beauvoir's work, her *Ethics of Ambiguity*, to sort of consider what it would mean to think about something like orientation or vibes in the absence of legitimation. And what I find particularly compelling about her work is she says, okay, so like there are There are no inherent values in anything; the world is the way it is because we have made it this way, right? And the sort of fact of human reality is that we all depend on each other and we all create this world together. And that means then that we are responsible and accountable to everyone else for how we contribute to making the world, right? That's what Beauvoir scholars call moral freedom, right? There's no predetermined values. We can do whatever we want. But because everybody else can do whatever they want and impact my capacity to do whatever I want, there's this sort of networked dependency, right? So like, I can be my most free when everyone else is also their most free. So So that's kind of the model or the alternative that I work with. And I say, okay, so there's no value or practice that is inherently more legitimate than any other. It's really what it comes down to is who you orient yourself towards and who you orient yourself away from. So it's a matter of people rather than like practices or techniques or even concepts or ideas, right? It's literally like, Every time I choose to do something or I'm acting, I'm choosing some group of people over others, right? Like, so for example, I live in New England and on my little part of my street, nobody puts up political signs because we

don't want to know, you know, what's deeply in your soul. I just want to be able to get along with you. Like the people across the street from me have lived in their house longer than I've been alive. So there's a real commitment to like, we choose the community here over like debating our thoughts on taxes, right? Whereas, in the broader context, I'm happy to tell you what I think about taxes, right? So that's an example of how in this situation, I choose these people over other alternatives, right? So that's kind of the model. That at least is a model for me that makes some kind of sense. There's a system to it. There's a logic to it. It's not super helpful because it just says, 'Hey, it's up to you!' But again, I think, that's also part of the deal with existentialism. Existentialism does not give you a neatly packaged easy answer and says like, actually it is your responsibility. I can't tell you what to do. I can just kind of say like, 'It's your job to do it.' So that's kind of where I end is sort of saying like, we can continue to think about vibes and think about orientation. That's not the problem. The problem is these legitimating logics.

John

Yeah, right. And yeah, because so many of the legitimating logics are oriented towards racial capitalism, you know, we need to keep that in mind when we engage with them.

Robin

Yeah, for sure.

John

Okay, so obviously like the book's coming out soon. So you probably finished writing it, a year or even more ago. What's happened in the time period since you sent the manuscript to publisher and now in terms of vibes?

Robin

Yeah, so I've been thinking a lot about slop. right? obviously kind of AI is the thing that everyone is tired of thinking about. But I've been thinking a lot about sort of the preference, like the bad taste of the extreme right. And slop is a part of that, right? So I've been thinking about how slop is not just like an object, like a representational object, right? But slop is also a mode of abstraction. The mode of abstraction that these image generators or text generators or music generators are using is the same mode of abstraction I'm talking about in the book. So you could say slop is a vibe. Right? So I've been thinking about how, yeah, slop is a product of a particular kind of abstraction that, so if you think about classical liberalism, right, like that's a mode of abstraction that relies on the public private distinction, right? We have civil society where everyone is an equal, empty individual, right? Formally equal before the law. And then the private sphere is the realm of difference where we're all different. That's one kind of abstraction.

Slop is evidence of a different kind of abstraction and a different relationship between the general and the universal, right? Where you have a vibe that's like this sort of profile that makes some qualitative styles more likely than others, right? So that's kind of how I'm thinking about it. in that way. And I'm also trying to think about, if slop is a method of abstraction, then non-generated or non-automated things can be slop. “Choosn’ Texas” is slop. Alex Warren's “Ordinary” is slop because they approach songwriting in the same way, right? Like, so they are, those songs are designed to game chart metrics, right? So they need to be playable across a number of radio formats. right? So like pop and adult country, maybe adult contemporary, they have to be generic enough that they can be personalizable on social media, right? Like that's how you get the TikTok and Instagram reel counts, right? So like, I think Alex Warren's “Ordinary” is a good example of this. It's kind of like positive vibes, but in a very generic way so that you can just use it to soundtrack a wedding or you could use it to, you know, for a video of my dog. Right? So they have this profile for racking up streams that then can be filled in. So “Ordinary” is kind of like the Imagine Dragons meets youth group version of that profile. “Choosn’ Texas” is the country version of that profile. You could probably have a different version of that profile. But yeah, so I'm trying to think about slop as a method of abstraction that even human-made things can exhibit.

John

But that's great. Are you, now do you have any particular project in mind with this or are you still kind of, this is still like playing around early phases of thinking through it?

Robin

It's still pretty early. It usually takes me probably about 12 to 18 months after one book to kind of ingest enough stuff to make it happen. I probably, I've got some talks coming up where I talk about this. I'll probably do an article next. But I also, the other thing I have coming up is I'm writing the 33 ⅓ for The Breeder's *Last Splash*. And that manuscript is due in April So I'm kind of going back to that and I've got a full version of it drafted and now now I'm deep in revisions So that's that's kind of what's up. What's up next?

John

Yeah, and that's a wonderful series, too. Yeah Okay. Yeah, you you kind of you like we just you just answered that the traditional last last question for for new books network, but I did have just what one follow-up because many of the listeners here are be like maybe graduate students, junior academics. And you have, I guess from your, from what I saw on your website fairly recently left a tenure track, tenured position to start working as an editor. For people who maybe, more junior in the academic career field,

it's like, would you mind talking a bit about that transition and maybe what the work of an editor at a press does?

Robin

Yeah, So I had been in a faculty role for probably about 15 years. My spouse was adjuncting. Then my spouse got a full-time job in a different state. We moved to North Carolina for my job. So it was kind of a fair thing, you know, we'll move for your job. So I was looking for something where I didn't have to commute by plane to work. And this role came up at Palgrave, acquiring in philosophy and media studies. I was like, oh, I think I can do that. And I think what made it, What made me a successful candidate is precisely that over the course of my career in academia, I had built up skills in publishing in a couple of ways. First, I had published with a number of different kinds of press books with different kinds of presses. So I kind of knew the industry from that end, right? Like I knew the difference between like a commercial press and an indie press and a university press. I also edited a journal, the *Journal of Popular Music Studies*. from 2019 to 2021. And I think that was the most legible experience to HR at the publishers, to be like, oh, yes, this person knows what it's like to do scholarly editing. And I think the main thing there was I learned how to handle peer review. That's 40% of my job is handling peer review, identifying peer reviewers, handling that process, interpreting reviews, right? Because one thing that I think people misunderstand is that peer reviewers don't decide whether something gets published or not. Editors decide whether something gets published or not, right? My dean used to have this phrase that I hated when she used it. She would say, faculty council has no decision making authority, it is merely an advisement to the dean who makes all the decisions. That's how peer reviews are. Peer reviewers have no decision-making authority. They are an advisement to the editor, right? So like learning how to interpret a peer review and understand like when you can toss reviewer 2's comments or when they're actually valuable, or maybe even it is an unhinged reviewer 2 comment, but that might be an unhinged perspective that other readers might bring to the text. So how do you make sure that no one else misinterprets the text the way this reviewer has. So I think one of the things I would suggest for people, if you are sort of maybe interested in, moving into scholarly publishing is use whatever service opportunities you can get to sort of be involved in publishing related activities. A lot of journals hire graduate students as managing editors. right? So managing editors do all the nuts and bolts, right? Like they're not making the sort of editorial or curatorial decisions, but they're handling like the content management backend platform. So that would be a really, it would be really good experience from the sort of publishing perspective, but you also really get to network with a lot of senior people in like a managing editorial role. So it's good for both academic and non-academic careers. So any, there's internships, a lot of presses have summer internships. I know UNC Press has some summer internships for students,

grad students at Chapel Hill. So look at maybe what, does your university have a press? Could you get some kind of internship there? That's another way to get some of that experience. But it's, I tell people that working in scholarly books editing is kind of like, it's kind of like my job is only advising PhD students. Right? Because I'm kind of working with people on their individual projects to shepherd them to successful review and completion. So that's, I guess that's the quickest way to sort of understand what I do in books. There's also roles in journal editing, which is a little different. That's more about kind of managing the academic editors and editorial boards. So that's in some ways a much more people-focused role, right? But I would definitely say a lot of the skills, both in terms of research and teaching, have definitely been very transferable.

John

That's always good to know. And as I mentioned before, I'm an adjunct lecturer here at UCSD and at a community college. I'm on the job market, but I'm looking broadly. And I know there's a lot of people listening here that probably feel the same way. All right. Well, Robin, thank you so much for your time. This is coming out before the book's published. Okay, so the book should be out on November 17th from Duke University Press. And congratulations on the book. It was a fun read. And thank you so much for your time.

Robin

Thank you. It's been really great to talk.