Interview: The Politics of the Baby Bump

Building upon the journal's interview and book review features, PoLAR: Political and Legal Anthropology Review is introducing author interviews, which bring authors in dialogue with reviewers in a conversational interview format. Liz Chiarello [LC] conducts our inaugural interview with Renée Cramer [RC], author of *Pregnant with the Stars: Watching and Wanting the Celebrity Baby Bump* (Stanford University Press, 2015). The book charts how the American understanding of pregnancy has evolved by examining pop culture coverage of the pregnant celebrity body. The conversation between Chiarello and Cramer about the book raises fundamental socio-legal questions about women's bodies and covers a range of related concerns, including gendered questions of reproduction, privacy, surveillance, celebrity status, and inequality.

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LC: Let me begin by saying that your book was an absolute pleasure to read. It is rare to find books that combine my passion for socio-legal scholarship with my (clearly research-oriented and not at all frivolous) passion for *U.S. Weekly*. I was especially impressed by how you took two issues—pregnancy and celebrity gossip—that are generally devalued due to their association with women’s bodies and women’s interests and highlighted their relevance for socio-legal scholarship on neoliberalism, politics, consumption, and law. You weave those themes together in novel and thought-provoking ways throughout the book while peppering in deceptively lighthearted examples from the magazines themselves.

Your strategy was reminiscent of Jean Kilbourne’s approach to examining advertising’s messages about women in her filmed lecture *Killing Us Softly*, which has been a staple of Introduction to Sociology classes for the last four decades. Paging through one of these magazines, we can easily miss the broader messages, at least on a conscious level, but seeing them placed side by side accompanied by your thorough, engaging analysis illuminated aspects of
celebrity pregnancy culture and attendant public consumption that I had not previously considered. Reading this book compelled me to reflect on a variety of issues that I have narrowed down to three major themes that I would like to explore with you further. The first theme I would like to address concerns the imperatives of control of women's bodies via limits on reproduction and their connection to celebrity.

I am fascinated by how various stages of mothering are afforded such different cultural value and are policed in different ways. Pregnant bodies are desirable. You note at the beginning of Chapter 2 that the baby bump is “the hottest accessory a woman can have” (Cramer 2015: 49). But this celebration of the “bump” contrasts sharply with later stages of mothering. For example, breastfeeding bodies are subject to the same kind of surveillance and negative public reactions that pregnant women once faced in public. How do you make sense of the simultaneous acceptance of pregnancy and rejection of breastfeeding, especially considering that breasts themselves are usually constructed as highly desirable?

**RC:** So, we’re jumping right in, here, huh? Straight to the body!

Thanks, first, for your kind words about the book. I had a blast writing it, and I’m glad to hear that reading it is both fun and intellectually useful. It’s really a pleasure to revisit it with you here.

This is a good question, and there is so much to think through in it. First, I want to say that politics and popular culture in the United States are rife with the tension between valorizing pregnant women and denigrating mothering women – or, even more starkly, valuing fetal life more than babies, moms, and kids. We see this in policy proposals that seek to limit access to abortion and birth control without increasing access to pre-natal health care, well-women services, pediatric services, school lunch programs, and other means of supporting the lives of mothers, parents, and children.

But, in relation to breastfeeding in particular, I think, on a gut level, this is about nudity, and access. You’re right, breasts are constructed as desirable parts of women’s bodies, and they are incredibly sexualized. When a woman nurses in public, there is always the potential that her breasts – including her nipples – will be exposed, and that exposure could be considered erotic or obscene. I don’t think it is primarily a concern that other people don’t want to see an exposed breast or nipple. I think it is, rather, that other people don’t want to see a child taking pleasure in that part of a woman’s body, and we feel anxious about whether or not the woman is feeling pleasure through nursing.

The “baby bump” is different. It is something to desire, to want – and women have portrayed themselves as sexy during pregnancy – but the bump itself isn’t a site of ‘sexiness’ or eroticism. It has a clear function: growing a fetus. Not many people would be confused about whether gaining 15 or so pounds
on your belly felt somehow inappropriately pleasurable. But, breasts (in contemporary popular culture) are for modest-though-titillating display and sexual pleasure. We have a sense of the breast as erotic. There is a culturally-enacted and deep-seated anxiety about women who nurse children, especially after the age of one, and especially if we nurse boys.

Celebrities are beginning to do interesting work around nursing publicly. Pink has done some gorgeous photo shoots of her nursing her babies while looking powerful, sexy, and maternal – but, like pregnancy and mothering, until policies support the practice, images and rhetoric remain a bit empty or unattainable.

LC: I wonder how norms of secrecy factor in (I’m thinking about Sarah Cowan’s work on secrecy in the abortion context.). It strikes me that secrecy could be relevant to your work in a number of ways. Pregnancy cannot be kept secret, at least not for long, though there are norms about not sharing pregnancy news until the end of the first trimester. At the same time, you note that pregnancy can be a legitimating narrative for weight gain, an occurrence that is otherwise considered unacceptable. Also, the paparazzi seem to want to scoop women by sharing their pregnancies before they do. Further, Roe v. Wade (1973) is grounded in a woman’s right to privacy. This is why I think Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s and Janet Vertesi’s efforts to hide their pregnancies (the former from the media and the latter from the internet) are so fascinating. I’m curious to hear your thoughts about how interests in secrecy and privacy are protected with respect to the pregnant body.

RC: I’m still thinking through how to distinguish between things kept secret and things kept private. I have a hunch that my answer is going to eventually rely on some definition of state involvement. For me, secrets are those things we hold onto ourselves and reveal socially, when we’re ready. We might keep a secret because we are ‘private’ people, or we might keep a secret because it pays to wait to tell it (a surprise party, or, as you note, not sharing news about pregnancy until after the first trimester), but a secret seems ‘social.’

Privacy, on the other hand, is something we protect – often against the state and in accordance with doctrinal principles that say that democratic citizenship and mature decision-making require, in many instances, privacy. Unless we grant access to them, our medical records are private. Lawyer-client communication is private. Detailed educational records are private. The social fact of a pregnancy might be kept secret; the medical fact of a pregnancy is an issue of privacy.

(As a side note, like many feminists, I am frustrated by the right to abortion access being grounded in a right to privacy, and I wish we could time travel back to Griswold v. Connecticut (1965) and start over, grounding right to access to birth control – and later abortion – in a right to bodily autonomy, a right to health care, etc. But, apparently time travel isn’t an option.)
What becomes really interesting to me is the way that “the public” becomes “state-like.” In the book, I argue that the public itself becomes a proxy for state power in the biopolitical governance of women’s pregnant bodies. So, women in the public eye aren’t allowed to keep the secret of their pregnancy (or must struggle to keep it secret), because the public eye facilitates a state-like power to infringe upon their privacy. Lawrence Friedman has a terrific book, *Guarding Life’s Dark Secrets*, which is about the development of laws meant to protect reputation – libel laws, obscenity laws, and the like. I have a sense that his 2007 book could be helpful to me, and us, as we think through the relationship between privacy, secrecy, reputation, law, and the public eye.

**LC:** Chapter 4’s discussion of surveillance during pregnancy is compelling. However, I wonder if you think that pregnancy demarcates the time this surveillance begins? I’m thinking about this in light of Miranda Waggoner’s work on pre-conception care. She argues that public health strategies conceive of all women as pre-pregnant, which warrants surveillance of their bodies even if they are not planning to become pregnant. How do you think that kind of surveillance affects stars? You talk about watching for the baby bump. Is that because that is the point at which surveillance can reasonably begin, or do you think it begins much sooner than that? Are celebrity women, like women more generally, constructed as pre-pregnant?

**RC:** Oh, gosh yes, the surveillance (of celebrities, and all women) starts sooner than pregnancy! Women’s bodies are so watched. And, women’s bodies are confused for women’s selves. In a way, we could argue that the pre-teen female body is a pre-pregnant body. I don’t think celebrities are more susceptible to being treated as pre-pregnant than the rest of us. In fact, maybe because they are watched publicly as part of their profession, they get more freedom from pre-pregnancy expectations – at least until they are married or partnered.

**LC:** In the section on the gendering of surveillance, which begins on page 119 of your book, I’m fascinated by how responsibilization for fetal development is used to justify surveillance and control of women’s bodies. I’m curious about how this contemporary approach intersects with positive eugenics and negative eugenics, as described so thoroughly by Dorothy Roberts in *Killing the Black Body*. It seems like focusing on the fetus creates a sort of public interest in monitoring women’s bodies, but is that the same for all women? Notably, unmarried Halle Berry was already framed as a bad mother. Is this about encouraging or discouraging reproduction? “If a woman is not willing to do self-surveil, society is happy to step in” (Cramer 2015: 122), but to what extent does this surveillance look different for women of color compared to white women or for poor women compared to wealthy women?

**RC:** Halle Berry is an interesting case, as many who term their politics pro-life held her up as a paradoxical example, a woman who chose to have a baby rather than abort. So even though she is indeed framed as “bad” for being...
unmarried, she is also “good” for having the child. I think the “goodness” comes from her ability to care for the child in material ways. She isn’t seen as a needy mother who puts a drag on the state and its resources. Part of the fear of single motherhood in Dan Quayle’s famous Murphy Brown speech (which I talk about early in the book) is a fear that women will create children who are dependent on the state and who engage in criminality as a result of that dependence (and the lack of male role models). Halle Berry, and other single mother celebrities, aren’t seen as “bad” because they have material resources to support their children.

My answer doesn’t really get to your perceptive question about eugenics and the tie to Dorothy Roberts’ work, which I rely on quite heavily in the book and in my teaching. It seems clear to me that at root of being able to engage in so much of contemporary so-called positive eugenics is a class privilege – the money to buy Baby Mozart CDs to play to the fetus, the money to shop at Whole Foods and eat an organic diet, the ability to live in a community that isn’t toxic. And, that so much of that class privilege – but not all of it – is tied up in white supremacy.

**LC:** Relatedly, the second theme I would like to explore is the relationship between cultural portrayals and contemporary politics.

You persuasively argue that cultural portrayals and judicial politics can be read in terms of each other. Yet, it often seems like more progressive portrayals of women’s lives are accompanied by more regressive policies and vice versa. This is nicely depicted in Chapter 1 where you show how judicial victories for protecting pregnant women occurred against a backdrop of neo-traditional television shows and how women’s rights were threatened in the Reagan era while women’s advancements were touted by shows like Murphy Brown. Why do you think there is such a mismatch between pop culture depictions and judicial decisions? It seems to me that it calls into question the premise that life imitates art or art imitates life. Instead, they seem to be on very different tracks.

**RC:** This is one of the perennial law and society/law and culture questions! And, I resist answering/struggle when I answer it because I worry that my answer becomes chicken-egg rather than constitutive. I think the answer has to be that – for every issue (heck, for every case!) and every period of time – we have a complex interaction of politics, culture, and personality. If we want to understand how backlash occurs, how progress is made, we can only be as specific as possible about each of those factors around each issue – and see, over time, what kinds of generalizations we can make. That answer reminds me of the importance of interpretive work, of ethnographic work, of careful analytical specificity. This work doesn’t necessarily help us understand causal chains, or perhaps accurately predict when we’ll get backlash or progress, but I think it can help us make damn good, well-informed, and often accurate ‘best guesses’ – and I’m increasingly comfortable with that.
LC: I’m interested in how your book relates to the abortion debate. If, as you argue, consumption is tied to citizenship in neoliberal society, is consumption then also tied to personhood? When women consume in ways that highlight their “bumps” are they also conferring personhood on the “bump” in ways that support anti-abortion politics? It is notable that the term “bump” is rather dehumanizing (far more so than fetus), yet it may actually affirm personhood.

RC: Yes! I hadn’t put it this way to myself, but absolutely. And, I’d agree that “bump” is pretty dehumanizing – but it’s not a “bump,” it’s a “baby bump.” That term to me is denotes an absolutely vulnerable and human subject. This reminds me of what anti-abortion protestors often chant to women as they enter clinics, “Please don’t kill your baby.” They never say, “Don’t kill your fetus.” Their insistence that the fetus is a baby, a pre-born person, is a key part of the rhetorical activism they engage in.

One thing, though: so many of the personhood and fetal protection laws, in their initial iteration, were there to protect the fetus from external harm, usually caused by an abusive partner or by random violence – or at least to compensate the mother for loss of a presumably wanted child. Because by the time the “bump” is visible, many moms are close to the stage of a pregnancy that the state can prohibit abortion – so a visible bump is a sign of acceptance, or welcome. What has changed in recent iterations of personhood laws is that the person the state is protecting the fetus from is the mother herself, who is increasingly positioned as a threat to the bump that is the eventual baby. That is what scares me about contemporary anti-abortion activism – the way that women are posited as a threat to the fetus, with absolutely no context around the choices and lives of the women so seen. It brings home to me that so many of the seemingly pro-life laws are also simultaneously anti-woman, and I don’t think we had to frame the politics of abortion I this way – but we have. In some future work, I’d like to think through what ‘choice’ means in the context of this framing, and how we can rethink the relationship of woman to fetus in a more emancipatory, useful, and honest way.

LC: Finally, I would like to explore your thoughts the possibility of rebellion, the various forms that rebellion might take, and the extent to which these forms of rebellion are actually prescribed by the same processes that promote conformity.

You describe several celebrities who have to some extent resisted neo-liberal hyper-surveillance and its accompanying construction of womanhood and motherhood, notably Pink, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Mila Kunis, and Gwyneth Paltrow. But, you compel readers to consider whether their actions count as rebellion. Specifically, you ask on page 151 of your book, “Can rebellious performances of celebrity pregnancy provide strong enough counternarratives to displace, or at least radically trouble, the normative assumptions about pregnancy that we have seen replicated in most coverage of
the celebrity baby bump?” In other words, does rebellion actually subvert cultural narratives, or is it just another form of commodified behavior?

This question made me think of two malls in Southern California not far from the University of California, Irvine (UCI) where I received my degree. One of these malls, South Coast Plaza, is touted as the highest grossing shopping center in the United States. The mall is full of high-end stores—Prada, Gucci, and Louis Vuitton—and many of the shoppers look like the stereotypical image of Southern California women—blonde, thin, tall, tan, heavily made up, possibly surgically enhanced. Less than two miles away from South Coast Plaza is another shopping center called the “Anti-Mall,” which boasts an Urban Outfitters, a resale shop, a high-end vegan clothing store, a salon, and a handful of restaurants. The juxtaposition of these two malls always struck me, because ultimately there was nothing “anti” about the “anti-mall.” They were both bastions of consumerism, even though the specific things being consumed were different. You could spend the same amount of money getting your hair dyed black at the anti-mall as you spent getting blonde highlights at South Coast Plaza.

The way that I think this example applies to your work is whether the forms of rebellion you witness are, in fact, rebellion or if they are scripted forms of pseudo-rebellion that closely resemble conformity. You describe various approaches that women can take to resisting pervasive neoliberal narratives, such as playing the game by self-monitoring, opting out by not having children (thereby risking the authenticity of one’s femininity), resisting through alternative methods of doing motherhood (like the rebels you describe in your last chapter), and trying to opt out of monitoring (like Adichie and Vertesi). In your opinion, to what extent do they truly subvert the neoliberal surveillance state and capitalist pressures and to what extent are these roles prescribed by the very processes they wish to subvert?

Theoretically, Sandy Levistky’s idea of discursive integration—facilitating change by grounding new ideas in well-established ones—may help to explain the rebel mothers you examine. Perhaps their rebellion makes sense in light of, rather than in opposition to, more traditional celebrity moms. They are still mothers even though they are mothering differently. Do they make sense to popular audiences because their actions reify a familiar narrative? Also, the choice to opt out seems to come at great expense to the women who attempt to do so. How might women resist these practices given how heavily institutionalized they are, and do you perceive these actions as authentic rebellion? To give a specific example, what do you make of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s success at hiding her pregnancy from the media? Is this empowerment or something else?
**RC:** I’m laughing, because I ate a meal with UCI faculty at the anti-mall a few months ago. We were all both chagrined, and proud, to be eating in a space that declares itself so proudly to be “anti” while so clearly engaging in being “mall.”

That’s the bind, isn’t it? We have to eat – and many of us choose to eat at restaurants at least occasionally – and it feels more virtuous to eat pizza sourced with local cheese than it does to eat at Pizza Hut (and then, of course, it feels more virtuous to eat pizza made with vegan cheese, doesn’t it?).

I have so many thoughts about and problems with this feeling of virtue tied to consumption. And I have lots of thoughts about and problems with a conversation about what is “authentic” (a word that I have a lot of trouble with). And, of course, I have lots of thoughts about and problems with thinking through what constitutes “rebellion.” They are grounded in my own self-understanding, that I find “rebellion” virtuous and interesting and necessary, and that for myself, being “authentic” has often been seen by others as being “rebellious.” And, my knowledge that others find rebellion uncomfortable and wrong-headed.

I wrote about Adichie’s pregnancy for Stanford’s blog, and in that piece I also write about Audra Simpson’s book, *Mohawk Interruptus* – a piece of scholarship that tackles these questions of self-hood, authenticity, and rebellion head on and obliquely at the same time. Right now, it is my impulse to return, incompletely, to narrative as the space in which we find and articulate rebellion and authenticity both – but I’m not ready to be coherent about it – the thought is on the tip of my tongue, and has been for maybe 3 years now. It relates to the power of honesty in storytelling and the power of stories to be constitutive of experience – but I’m not ready yet!

**LC:** As another example, you claim that Pink refuses to perform her pregnancy according to norms even though she is aware of them. I think it goes further than that. Just as Levitsky and others show that the seeds of change are present in the status quo, so too are the roots of rebellion firmly embedded within common soil. To what extent do you think that the forms of rebellion you describe are determined by the status quo? Or, in other words, how do cultural expectations about pregnancy create pathways for rebellion that do not disrupt their attractiveness to fans? Can you envision a form of maternal rebellion that would lose these women their fan base and their voice? How do you think those boundaries of what constitutes acceptable resistance are established? Again, you stress that the willingness of rebel moms to “play the game” makes them palatable to fans and bloggers (Cramer 2015: 160). Perhaps this suggests a limit to rebelliousness, beyond which the perks of celebrity status are threatened?
RC: I do think that our forms of rebellion are structured by what is possible, but I am resistant to thinking that this means they are not rebellions.

Often, when I tell my students that particular things are “social constructs” – like race, or law – they get confused and think that this means they are not real. But the couch I’m sitting on right now was made, was constructed, and its solid. The building I am in was made/constructed, and it is absolutely real. To notice that a concept is constructed is not to notice that it is fake – it is simply to notice that humans are responsible for creating it. Likely these constructions were intended to reinforce the status quo, sure, but when we notice that humans constructed something, and remember that we are humans, we notice and remember that we could make different choices around these constructions and change them or their valence. I think that is what these celebrity moms (and other people) are doing when they play with their pregnancies in non-normative ways: they are engaging in writing new stories about pregnancy – theirs and others’ – which is a rebellious interaction with constructed categories.

LC: Finally, I’m curious about how you see the relationship between celebrity moms and the medical community in light of social control and responsibilization (Cramer 2015: 125). On the one hand, as you mention, women are expected to follow general public health admonishments about alcohol, raw fish, lunch meat, etc., but at the same time, some celebrities seem to be constructing their own idea of health based on alternative medicine and food-based healing (I’m thinking of Paltrow in particular.). It strikes me that there may be a sort of battle for power between celebrity moms and healthcare professionals and that perhaps being a “good mom” means knowing more than the medical professionals or means following medical guidelines but going beyond them to construct an individualized (and attainable only by the rich) version of health and wellbeing. Isn’t that also part of the moral hierarchy (p. 126), not just caring for oneself, but caring for oneself in individualized ways? You talk about this again on page 144: women are supposed to be docile and follow medical orders, but they are also expected to be fierce protectors of their children and shield them from everyone and everything, including the medical establishment, no? I’m curious to hear your thoughts on this.

RC: I’ve been watching this quite a bit lately, as I am working on a project about midwifery care and out-of-hospital birth. We know that, for low-risk pregnancies, out-of-hospital birth is just as safe as hospital birth, but the rhetorical construction of the “hospital birth experience” by midwives and their advocates has a tendency to demonize the hospital setting in a way that makes a woman choosing hospital birth and epidurals (which the medical community holds out as a gold standard) as somehow responsible for anything that goes wrong in the delivery (including needing a C-section). So, moms who choose out-of-hospital birth have a narrative written about them that they are bucking conventional medical wisdom in an often-oppositional stance towards the medical establishment. This sometimes is followed by an
oppositional stance to other public health and medical expectations – like a decision not to vaccinate or to follow an alternative vaccination schedule. Many times, these women are seen by their communities as docile to a higher authority – perhaps God, perhaps nature – which allows them to be defiant of medical and state authority, all in the service of being a “good mom.”

LC: Thank you for taking the time to share your insights. It was such a pleasure talking with you and diving more deeply into this rich and engaging work.

RC: Thank you, Liz, for your stunningly generous reading of it and your provocative questions!

Cases Cited

Griswold v. Connecticut 381 U.S. 479 [1965]

Roe v. Wade 410 U.S. 113 [1973]

Works Cited


Recommended Citation