

## Episode 1.12 Embracing “Good Enough” with Cynara Geissler PART TWO!

September 29, 2017

Hannah (Host): [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans] Hi, I'm Hannah McGregor and this is *Secret Feminist Agenda*. Welcome back. I'm doing something I've never done before today because, fuck it, this is my podcast and I can do whatever I want. I'm bringing you a straight up sequel, aka the rest of my conversation with the very brilliant Cynara Geissler. But before we get to that, I want to tell you what my secret feminist agenda is this week. [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans]

Hannah (Host): Let's talk about destigmatizing mental illness in professional settings. [laughter] Doesn't that sound fun? It's gonna be fun. I am sitting in my office right now and sitting right in front of me is a stack of receipts for my delightful and wonderful counselor who I see every couple of weeks and have been seeing since I first managed to get in with her a few months after moving to Vancouver. This is the first time I have been back in regular counseling. I've done a little bit of crisis counseling over the past decade or so, but I haven't done regular counseling for some time now, and my God, can I just say? Can I just say, everybody do it no matter how okay you think you are. Everybody, just do it. If you can afford it, just do it. It is just so useful. But I've been thinking about the ways in which we do and do not talk about mental health and the environments that we do and do not talk about mental health in, and I've been thinking in particular about this around the subject of the university, unsurprisingly because that is my professional setting. Um, you know, I've been thinking about the ways in which students disclose to me things like depression and anxiety, which I've had many, many students disclose to me, and often with a sense of discomfort, with a sense that maybe this disclosure has not been greeted particularly compassionately in the past or that people haven't understood what it means. But I've also—the very brilliant Lucia Lorenzi was tweeting recently about ableism in the academic community and about her own experience essentially being told that people with anxiety can't do PhDs. And I, myself, I have a pretty, uh, ever-shifting relationship to anxiety.

I didn't think of myself as a person who struggled with anxiety for a really long time, really until I got to grad school. I got very, very sick during my PhD. I actually lost a ton of weight because I was so ill, which was also incredibly bad for my mental health because that also triggered a ton of really problematic restricted eating and over-exercising behaviors as well, but, um, yeah, I got really, really sick and it ended up being diagnosed as anxiety and I was told that I could medicate it or that I could try to manage it otherwise. And you know, I focused on managing it otherwise and I'm figuring out ways to structure my academic life around not literally killing myself, but that was particularly hard to do because the forms of overwork that had led to my health breakdown in the first place were explicitly praised by people in mentorship positions. They told me that the most

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exemplary thing about me as an academic was how incredibly hard I worked, and meanwhile I was working so hard, I was literally making myself sick. And I eventually got to a point where I said to myself like, "I can't do this job. I can't stay in this field if it's going to do this to me," but that decision has been something that I've needed to keep reminding myself of. There have been time and time again where I've really pushed myself too far and push myself too hard and not taken the time to make sure that I was okay, myself sick again, really bottomed out my mental health in different ways, and time and time again, that kind of behavior gets praised, right? Whether it's overtly being praised by somebody who says that they really admire how hard you work or how productive you are or implicitly being endorsed, right, via the way that that it feels like that makes you more successful and if that's how you're defining yourself as a person through your success, then overwork is gonna seem like a great thing. It's going to seem like a, like an ideal thing. So, at some point I sort of got this idea that I was just a person who, uh, suffered from anxiety, which is the case with a lot of academics, a lot of high-achieving and smart people I know often do have struggles with anxiety, and that was just something that I thought I knew about myself and that needed to be managed. And interestingly, during the work I've been doing with this particular counselor, I have come to suspect that maybe what's going on for me actually isn't anxiety.

What—okay, I'm going to pause here and say that I'm actually, even though I'm sitting alone in a room having a lot of trouble articulating this, but what we have been talking about is the possibility that what is going on is essentially trauma. It's trauma reaction. I don't want to get super into what that trauma is. Maybe we will at one point. It's not a secret, but I do want to talk about how that realization both opened up a lot of new understandings of sort of myself and how I am in the world for me, but also felt like, strangely, like more of a failure than anxiety? I am not even sure why that might be the case, unless it's that I just know so many people who have expressed to me that they struggle with anxiety but I have fewer people in my life who talk openly about trauma and about living with trauma as part of your life and what that means.

And putting that all aside because the thing I actually want to talk about is not, like, my diagnosis [laughter] and what's going on in my life, but just that ongoing struggle to, um, to bring your whole self into your workplace, into your relationships, into your understanding of who you are, and how much it is that mental health in particular feels like a thing that we're just not allowed to bring with us. That we're just not allowed to actually really, really talk about. There's a wonderful piece on the website *Hook and Eye*, which you can visit [hookandeye.ca](http://hookandeye.ca). It's a piece written by a Mel Dagleish, who is a long-term pal of mine from the world of academia, and she wrote a piece a few days ago, I'll link to it in the show notes, called, "Why can't we be our whole selves as academics?" and she writes about the way in which academia in particular seems to expect people to really just sort of slice off the parts of themselves that aren't their minds. She writes, "I so appreciate getting to be a whole person at work, one who doesn't have to pretend that she's a worker and a researcher and a writer, but not also a person. I can be a person who wants a kid and someone who is good at and

taken seriously in her work. I can be a person who is sick or hurt or stressed out by pending renovation and someone who is good at and taken seriously in her work. I can be a person who writes about infertility on the Internet and someone who is good at and taken seriously in her work," and then she concludes, "Why can't we have that as academics? It's a genuine question. What does an academic culture that requires us to align our personal lives, to treat our bodies as containers for our brains, even with broken feet, to elevate intellect over affect do that's useful in the academy?" It's a really beautiful piece. You should go read the whole thing, but it's been really, really on my mind in the context, in particular, of the ways that thinking about trauma has really made me think about what parts of myself I do and do not bring into my work and how much of my own personal history, of my own story, I leave out of, you know, of narratives of who I am and the work that I do and why it is, where that feeling comes from, that deep conviction somewhere inside of me—and I think that somewhere inside of a lot of us—that if we were to be truly vulnerable in our workplaces with our colleagues and our intellectual work, that people would take us less seriously. And it's, I do think it's a risky move. I do think it's risky to sort of identify and disclose to people mental health concerns, but I also think we're not going to change the culture around being able to bring your whole self into different spaces until more of us do it. I do think that culture is changing. I really do. I just, I for one am continuing to experience that struggle and I bet some of you are too and that's also in part what Cynara and I talk about as we continue our conversation in this episode. We talk and think about what it really means to be, to be a full person, to live really fully as a complete person. So, you know what, let's just get into that now. [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans]

Hannah (Host): You technically already met Cynara, but I'm going to introduce her again just in case you listened to these out of order or something. Cynara Geissler is the marketing manager at Arsenal Pulp Press, which is a leading Canadian independent book publisher here in Vancouver, BC. She's also a writer and a fashion icon. That remains true. Honestly, her Instagram just fills me with so much joy I can't even handle it. Her poems and essays have appeared in magazines such as *Event*, *Geez Magazine*, *Shameless* and *SubTerrain*, and several of her essays on fat acceptance are published in big spine-y books like *Lessons from the Fatosphere*. She also wrote the iconic *Establishment* article, "Toddler Grandma Style: The Fashion Approach that Will Set You Free." I'm channeling some toddler grandma style today with my very silly bun and pattern-clashing, so really feeling that one today. We delve deeper into the capitalist logics of self-care and Cynara effectively talks me out of getting a time turner tattoo. Enjoy. [Music: "You Don't Own Me" by Lesley Gore]

Cynara (Guest): [conversation fades in]... the Hermione example of this is, like, you get a time turner so that you can actually stop and control time to take on as much work as possible, more than actual day's work, right? And I mean, I feel like the first time I read about that, I was like, "I want this." Like that was my immediate reaction was like "Wow, I could pack in like four degrees until one degree. That seems like a great way to live." Right? And now I'm kind of like, no, like the time turner

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should actually be like a cautionary tale. That's how we should interpret it.  
[laughter]

Hannah (Host): That's really... like I've actually considered getting a time turner tattoo.  
[laughter] Like, I identify so strongly with this, with this desire to turn back time and have a doubly productive day. What a fucking capitalist nightmare.  
[laughter] My God. I had—I'm trying to learn to get better at vacations and that is, um, that's hard for all kinds of reasons, including that sense that, like, because vacation is a privilege, particularly travel-oriented vacations, like because they are a privilege, I need to pack them full of like self-improvement. Like I better go look at a lot of art and learn, learn about art and uh, my travel is also almost always work-related, and so that sort of doubly, like I'm usually there for a conference anyway, and so the pressure is always there. And the last big trip that I took, I was chatting with a friend before and I was like, "I'm worried"—the trip was two months of being on the road—and I was like, "I'm really worried I'm going to burn out on this trip." And she said, "Can you, if you know that in advance, can you give yourself permission to take days off?" And one day in Dublin, world capital full of things I haven't yet seen, I spent a 100% of the day in my pajamas in my Airbnb playing a video game. Like, dusk 'till dawn. [laughter] It was, it was deeply relaxing, like maybe a vacation ought to be. [laughter]

Cynara (Guest): And I was going to say like, they talk about, there's no such thing as like topping up a sleep deficit. So like if you—it doesn't actually physiologically work to like go four hours, four hours, four hours, four hours and then have one like 24 hour sleep and, like, you reset at zero? I think it's the same thing with actual taking of breaks like, if you're not every day building in rest as a separate, like I don't know what we want to call it, a jar of marbles or like the point system and the houses. [laughter] Like if you're not topping up your work and rest every day, you can't one day just do a whole bunch of rest and then that makes up for all of that rest that you, you know, you didn't give that to yourself. So you burn out and then recovering from burnout, we also know physiologically is like healing from a car crash or a trauma or a sports injury. Like it actually isn't something that you can heal by, you know, just like watching a couple of hours of TV every night for a few weeks or whatever, people kind of think. So I just, this is a lot, this is what's on my mind, is like how do we carve out—I think we have to, I think it's urgent.

Hannah (Host): How many people have you seen try to recover from burnout by going on a diet, starting an exercise plan, downloading a meditation app, like who are like, burnout is a failure and I can fix burnout by like... what is this, it's probably a tweet or something, but like, "No amount of yoga will ever save us from late capitalism." [laughter] Like, we can't recover, we can't take personal responsibility for burnout and try to treat it by doing more other things, and that attitude of like, it's your job as an individual to overcome your burnout by prioritizing wellness, which then becomes another set of tasks that you are required to take on, uh, like... God, it's just fucking trap. It's all a fucking trap. [laughter] But what do you do then? Right? Like, part of it, I had this colleague

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at the U of A who really liked to talk about the, um, the sort of political value of doing nothing, and so he was like, sometimes, I will go into my office and then just sit in my office and not work, and it's a deliberate—like, it's not that I don't have stuff to do, it's a deliberate, like, "I'm not doing anything today because fuck the university. Yeah, it's paying me, but fuck it." Um, but again, like who has the option to do that and who doesn't? You can't do that in a wage job. You can't be like, "I'll show up to work, but I'm not actually going to work today."

Cynara (Guest): Yeah, you can't. And I guess, I guess it's the thing of learning good enough, and that's something that Brené Brown talks about a lot that I think is a really good metric. She in her research sort of defines wholehearted people and it's whether or not you like that term doesn't really matter, but there are people who get up every day and they find time every day to do what she calls play, which at first she finds very horrifying. She's like, "Who are these people? They just waste time. I don't understand it." Like, she can't even call it play at first because she's just like, this is anathema to me.

Hannah (Host): [laughter]

Cynara (Guest): These people diddle around! Like, she's so put off by it that it took her time as a researcher to be like, "Oh, they do something that's not about making money." And I think, I had a really productive conversation with a woman who owns a little restaurant here and she talked about like, "I don't know if I can stay in this city," which is Vancouver, "because I feel like I'm like a meter in a taxi cab and everything I have to do has to earn income." So, like, how do we actually give back to our communities? How do we know what it feels like to say "yes" to something when we say "yes" as a matter of survival, right? How do we know the difference between the want and the need? And I don't know. I think we're in a city that uniquely amplifies the struggle of that and other cities where the cost of living is, you know, absurd would also do that. But it's that thing of like if I, yeah, if I actually feel like everything I do has to bring me a source of financial income, what does that mean for the community? Like, am I actually offering any of my services to myself or other people? Probably not. I'm probably, you know, just doing anything for money and that's a really gross way to live and it's not, um, you know, it's not cold, hard capitalists of the world that espouse these beliefs. Like, this sort of belief is internal. So I guess, like, I don't have a really good answer, but I have the answer of like, what if we were—we got good at thinking about what good enough is? Like, what if when you took on a class, maybe you did like five handouts instead of 15 handouts? Like, that's a really simple example, but I kind of think that I don't know that we are the best judges of like—do you know what good work looks like? That's another question I have for you. Like, can you look at work that you've done and say, like, "I've done enough, this is good enough"? Or do you see 300 other things you could do into infinity? Like, there's no end in sight.

Hannah (Host): I already referenced this in this, uh, when we were talking before we started recording, but I've had now two terrible readings with my pal Carly (who will be on this podcast at some point in the future) and in both of those readings, this

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card came up that Carly's reading of it is, the card is asking you, do you know what enough feels like? How will you ever know if you've done enough or if you have enough? And that card, like that freaks me out, because the way that I have always approached, like friendships, relationships, career, success has been there is no enough. Like, it will never be enough. I will never be a successful enough person, a smart enough person, a hard working enough person, a likable enough person, a well-dressed enough person. Like, and to say, "This is enough. I've done enough work. I have enough friends," like I don't—like, that sounds nuts to me.

Cynara (Guest): [laughter]

Hannah (Host): Like any of those things sound wild to me. Um, which reminds me of somebody, like it's that scarcity again. I was reading, I cannot even remember who it is, but I was reading somebody on the Internet about food shaming, saying that we need to stop shaming binge eating and emotional eating because they are perfectly reasonable reactions to a life of not having enough. That when you've spent your entire life with people telling you like you're not allowed to have food, you're not allowed to enjoy food, like, this is a perfectly reasonable attitude to have towards food. But it's that like scarcity breeds this panic of like, it will never, it will never ever be enough. So like, how do I say enough is enough?

Cynara (Guest): Yeah, and I think the idea of earning care, earning rest, is something that we have to confront in ourselves. Like, I had a counselor once who sort of said like, "If there was a," [laughter] this is a hilarious counselor example, so get ready; she was like, "If you walked into a room and there was just a baby on a couch, like a baby, someone had left it there."

Hannah (Host): Oh yeah.

Cynara (Guest): They're so good, right? So it's a baby, it's abandoned, it's there. She's like, "Do you think that that baby deserves care? Like, do you think that babies should entertain you to deserve—like, should that baby make like a strong political argument for you to change its diaper and pick it up?"

Hannah (Host): [laughter]

Cynara (Guest): Yeah. Yeah. And then she's like, "No, it deserves care by virtue of just being alive and being there. It deserves to be loved and deserves a home, it deserves shelter, it deserves all this stuff." And so, I mean, that's kind of a ridiculous example, but at the time that was the example that I really needed to hear. It was just like, yeah, right now I'm super depressed. I am the baby, I'm the baby on the couch, [laughter] and like before I can make a strident political argument that changes our time, I need my basic needs met and we all deserve to have our basic needs met. So we really, it's a shifting of the idea that like once I write the perfect paper or the perfect tweet or I am the best at being a friend, I win the competition of being the best possible friend. Like, then I'm allowed to like,

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whatever, clock out or take care of myself or say no to things. It's like no, everyday you're allowed to say no and yes to things, right? I don't know if you believe me, I know if I believe me, but like—

Hannah (Host): I believe you, I believe you mentally, but again that sense of like what do you do to deserve care feels much more visceral. There is a, you know, one of Alice Munro's first short story collections? It's called *Who Do You Think You Are?*

Cynara (Guest): Yes.

Hannah (Host): That, the first time I ever encountered that title, it just resonated with me. Just that, like, very visceral sense of like, where do you get off? But at the same time, because you said, you know, you mentioned like writing the paper that is going to change the world, right? Like, why do I think it's my job to change the world?

Cynara (Guest): It sounds narcissistic when you really break it down and I think that, I don't really think it's pure narcissism in most people because that's a very specific thing, but I do think we feel, yeah, women feel pressure. It's that rhetoric of like twice as hard to get half as much and like those things are true, like that we face these barriers, but at the same time, I think we internalize them as motivators and they're not motivators. Like shame is actually not a motivator. It's a terrible motivator. Like guilt. Guilt can be useful because you can take it and say like, "I feel bad about the way I behaved. What can I do to not repeat this behavior?" But if you, if your immediate reaction when you can't do like 13,000 things in a day is to be like, "I'm a pile of garbage." Like that doesn't actually turn you into, I don't know, where am I going with this garbage metaphor? Gold, I don't know.

Hannah (Host): [laughter]

Cynara (Guest): Like, yeah, like insulting yourself doesn't then alchemize your output into gold? It actually doesn't do that, right, but yeah, I don't know. These are, I just, I would like us to carry these questions forward, I suppose. I would like us to sort of like, choose... choose tenderness to ourselves. [Music: "You Don't Own Me" by Lesley Gore]

Hannah (Host): You aren't already following Cynara now on Twitter at @cynaragee and on Instagram at @cynaragee, that's C Y N A R A G E E, then honestly why the heck not? And you know what else you should be doing listening to Kaarina and talk about self-care right now. [Music: Kaarina's Theme: loon hoots, instrument plays]

Kaarina: Welcome to Kaarina's Cozy Self-care Corner. So today I want you to think about your body and I want you to acknowledge that your body is an important and valid part of your life and an important and valid thing to spend your time on. And I know that we have people relying on us and I know that we have deadlines and responsibilities and so many urgent things, and sometimes it can feel like you are the last priority on your list. Today, I just want to give you permission to prioritize your own body. I want you to think about whether it's

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pain, whether you need to go to the doctor or seek some kind of medical help for anything, no matter how small, something that's been persistent or something that you've been putting off. I want you to think about ways that you can rest your body, whether it's, you know, saying no to a certain event, taking evening for yourself, or having a bath. Um, maybe you can specifically spend time on your body. Maybe you want to do a face mask or maybe you want to get your hair cut or lie in bed for a really long time or drink a ton of water. Whatever you think is going to make your body feel better today, this week, this minute. So I've never really understood this discourse around self-care as pedicures, because I really hate pedicures. I hate nail polish. I don't like people touching my feet. Once I got a pedicure and five minutes later my brother stepped on my foot and the pedicure was ruined and my foot was in pain, so negative associations with pedicures. But I think there is something in there about just finding a space where your body is attended to. So I want you to think about how you can attend to your body, what a space where your body is the priority looks like. Maybe it's masturbating, maybe it's having sex, maybe it's cuddling, maybe it's going for a run. Really? Really, it's going for a run? Okay, yeah, go for a run. Good choice. And I just want you to remember that your body is so important and you're always going to be stronger and happier if you give it time, space and attention. So, good luck. [Music: Kaarina's Theme: loon hoots, instrument plays]

Hannah (Host):

As always, you can find show notes and all the episodes of Secret Feminist Agenda on [secretfeministagenda.com](http://secretfeministagenda.com). You can follow me on Twitter @hkpmcgregor and tweet about the podcast using the hashtag #secretfeministagenda, and do keep rating and reviewing and sharing it. Our listeners go up every week and it's a delight to see. The world needs more feminism because, as Cynara reminded me today, feminists are just inherently interesting. The podcast theme song is "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans off their album, *Chub Rub*. You can download the entire album on [freemusicarchive.org](http://freemusicarchive.org), or follow them on Facebook. Cynara's theme is "You Don't Own Me" by Lesley Gore. That's it for this week, my little daffodils. This has been *Secret Feminist Agenda*. Pass it on. [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans]