

Episode 1.9 Emoji Faces & Feminist Friendship with Erin Wunker

September 8, 2017

Hannah (Host): [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans] Hi, I'm Hannah McGregor and this is *Secret Feminist Agenda*. Happy new semester to possibly just my Canadian listeners and to myself, of course. Happy new semester, Hannah, you're crushing it so far and you know what else is going to crush it? This episode. Oof, that's a lot of false cheer being imbued into this intro [laughter], but first I want to tell you what my secret feminist agenda is this week. [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans]

Hannah (Host): Yesterday, September 6th, pioneering feminist literary critic Kate Millett died at the age of 82. Those of you who are also feminist-leaning academics probably know Kate Millett's work; a lot of us had to read excerpts or all of her book *Sexual Politics* at some point during our education. Others may not have heard of her. She's one of those really prominent second wave feminists who's in a lot of ways fallen out of popularity. The only reason I know her is because she was assigned to me during my year abroad at University of Edinburgh. Millett's death, I think, I mean for one thing is a great opportunity for those of you who haven't heard of her to go read a little bit about this woman and her work and the role that she played in radical lesbian second wave feminism. But I think it's also an opportunity to think a little bit about our relationship to our feminist foremothers. I read Millett at a point in my academic career and during my political awakening? [laughter] Sure. Let's go with that. Uh, when I was ready for her, when the thing she had to say felt deeply radical to me and deeply eye opening to me. In *Sexual Politics* in particular, Millett really tears apart the way that patriarchal understandings of gender are embedded into literature. She walks us through some really major and particularly, you know, in the 1960s and 70s really well-regarded male authors, well-regarded within universities, well-regarded by, you know, by the left-leaning academically-inclined readers and scholars of the moment. I'm thinking of people like, like DH Lawrence and Henry Miller, people who are really held up not only as being sort of classic authors, but as being, in some ways, radical authors. Millett really gets in, gets into their texts and talks about the ways that some really iconic scenes and images and books just profoundly exclude women as subjects and women as agents and women as capable of our own sexual desire, as capable of our own perspectives. She also tears for Freud a new one, which I really enjoy because not personally a fan of psychoanalysis. I mean if you are, enjoy, you can have it all. I don't want any of it. It's all for you. Yeah. So I came across Millett at a point when she really gave me a vocabulary and a set of ideas that help to move my feminism forward, to help move my career as a literary critic forward, to really start to articulate the way I understood power to be embedded in texts. And her work has limitations, right? Politically radical work of the past, in some ways, it ends up having an expiry date. Other people build on it and critique it, and then we look back at it and it feels dated and it feels awkward and often it feels politically problematic. You know, I haven't revisited Millett's work with an idea

to intersectional and critical race feminism, but I'd be surprised if it held up honestly. I mean she talks about women being colonized by patriarchy as though colonialism can be used as a metaphor for white women's experience of patriarchy rather than being something that is being experienced simultaneously by Indigenous women, so there's a problem right there. But I do feel sometimes within feminism, within feminisms, that there is this tendency to say because progress, because progressiveness is so much a part of the work that we're doing, that when you've pushed past somebody, when they're not serving you anymore, there's a desire to look back at them and say, you know, "This was bad. This was never useful in the first place. This was always wrong." And I want to pause and honor the feminist who I was at the age of 20 when I first read Millett and the work that her books are still doing for a lot of people in the world, the work that, you know, a lot of earlier feminist texts are still doing. When we talk, when I talk about the importance of being able to, to look at things critically and to pick them apart without fully discarding them—you know, I've talked about that in the context of fandom, the context of popular culture that we love, but that's true, that's true of political figures too. It's true of political texts. It's true of cultural theory. It's true of all of these things, right? It's useful to be able to go back and look and say, "It was flawed. It was of its moment." I don't mean that in the way that people say, you know, John A. Macdonald was person of his moment, you know, and that we shouldn't critique his actions because saying somebody is a product of their moment is never a reason not to hold them accountable for terrible acts of violence. Obviously fuck John A. Macdonald. Like, no kidding. You know, and fuck white feminism and fuck feminism that is not intersectional, that foregrounds white middle-class women's experiences only and, at the same time, if there's ways that those texts still serve us, if there's things that we can still get from them, or that we have gotten from them, I want to keep honoring that. I want to remember, you know, who somebody like Kate Millett was in 1970 when she published a book that was based in work that had gotten her in many ways sort of panned by academia, but that sold I think like 10,000 copies in the first two weeks. You know, a moment when a kind of elite feminism that had been happening behind the walls of the university burst out and became something much more public, much more widespread. Academic feminism, that kind of feminism that's engaged in things like literary critique, that's not the most important feminism, certainly not the only one, and none of this should suggest, you know, that that's the only place feminism was happy in the 1960s, because that would be absurd. But it's feminism that's been important to me, it's feminism that's been important to a lot of women I've known. So take a minute, go read a couple of articles about Kate Millett. If you feel inclined to maybe pick up *Sexual Politics* and, and read some sections. It was a very popular book in its day. I think you will find it a lot less dry than you might expect. And in general, keep learning your feminist history and keep thinking about what it means to both critique and move beyond the thinkers who came before us, while still honoring the work that they did, however flawed that work might have been. [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans]

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Hannah (Host): It's time to meet Erin. Erin Wunker is an author, an activist, and an academic. She's an assistant professor of English at Dalhousie University in Halifax where she teaches and researches in the areas of Canadian literature and critical theory. She's also the author of the absolutely splendid book, *Notes from a Feminist Killjoy*, published last year with Book Thug and you should for sure go buy it right now. It's an incendiary, magical book. I cry every time I read it and I have read it many times. She's co-founder, writer and managing editor of the feminist academic blog *Hook and Eye: Fast Feminism, Slow Academe*, and until recently was the chair of CWILA, Canadian Women in the Literary Arts. She is also one of my favorite people in the entire universe. Erin and I text constantly, but for the purposes of this podcast, we sat down and had a good old fashioned Skype conversation. Here it is. [Music: "Leather Jacket" by Thunderbitch]

Hannah (Host): Hey, how's it going?

Erin (Guest): Great. How are you?

Hannah (Host): I'm good.

Erin (Guest): I love your face! Come on.

Hannah (Host): About an hour and 15 minutes ago, like when we started the Skype call, [laughter] I was very, like very, close to just having an a cry.

Erin (Guest): Oh yeah. That's okay.

Hannah (Host): Yeah, but right now, I'm feeling really, like, filled with joy.

Erin (Guest): Sorry, that just made my heart do a bubble. [laughter]

Hannah (Host): It's because of the healing power of friendship.

Erin (Guest): Amen.

Hannah (Host): I know right? [laughter]

Erin (Guest): One of the only kind of religions that I'm into.

Hannah (Host): [laughter] It's really incredible. It's really incredible. Last night I was feeling really panicked and stressed about this whole real estate search business and so I called Claire and it was like 10:00 at night her time and she was like, "Is everything okay?" And I was like, "Yeah, I am just freaking out a little bit and I need you to talk me down for like three minutes." And it was great. After three minutes, felt substantially better. Friendship is magic.

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Erin (Guest): Yeah, yeah, yeah. I feel like Lucia and I do that via text message nearly daily, where she's like, "How is it today?" And sometimes I'm like, "Good, went for a jog and I ate corn. That'll be interesting in two hours, you know."

Hannah (Host): [laughter]

Erin (Guest): And other days I'm like,

Hannah (Host): How do you express those, um, those wide and slightly shell-shocked eyes in text form? Is it an emoji?

Erin (Guest): Oh there's an emoji for that.

Hannah (Host): Okay, good, good.

Erin (Guest): Like, mmm, I'm not very good.

Hannah (Host): Oh yeah, the wide-eyed emoji. I know that wide-eyed emoji. I feel like the upside-down smile emoji is often my go-to, like, "Oh no!" [laughter]

Erin (Guest): [laughter] I also really like the flat one.

Hannah (Host): Oh, the flat mouth is great. [laughter] This is good. Podcasting is an audio medium, so I'm glad that we're focusing on making emoji faces.

Erin (Guest): Well, you know, I mean, anything, anything for the listeners, really. Anything to enhance the experience of our conversation.

Hannah (Host): I feel like there's probably technology now where I could just drop emojis right into the middle of the audio stream. We'll see.

Erin (Guest): Is that called a sound bite?

Hannah (Host): [laughter] I don't know! [laughter]

Erin (Guest): [laughter] [inaudible] like *Witch, Please* with the [magical sound effect].

Hannah (Host): Oh yeah. I've been steering clear of sound effects for *Secret Feminist Agenda* because I don't want to like crib *Witch, Please's* style too much, but I've gotten so used to it to editing in that way, to like putting response sound effects, that it's weird sometimes to not be, like, that deserves a round of applause.

Erin (Guest): Yeah, and then like saturated silences.

Hannah (Host): Yeah. I am still really bad at leaving silences into my recordings. Like I delete all of the silences and I remember Trevor, Marcelle's partner, telling me early on that it's really effective to let there be some silence in your audio recordings,

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that that can be really powerful and can be really helpful for listeners to sort of like take a pause and sort of re-orient themselves. But like, I do think that there's this way in which, I don't know, like silence is a powerful move and I feel like I need to just fill all of the audio space. [laughter]

Erin (Guest): Yeah, I understand. I feel like I do that with commas in my writing.

Hannah (Host): With commas?

Erin (Guest): Yeah.

Hannah (Host): A friend of mine told me recently that I write as though it is a contest to see if I can put every kind of preposition into one sentence.

Erin (Guest): I don't know what to say to that. I feel like that's either a really good friend, or that's a friend that's giving you editorial side-eye. [laughter]

Hannah (Host): It's a really good friend who is helping me, who has—like, we did our master's together and then he left academia after that and has been working in like copywriting and editing ever since, and so is substantially better at writing a readable sentence than I am.

Erin (Guest): Oh, knows a thing or two. That's a pain.

Hannah (Host): Knows a thing or two. No, it's wonderful. It's wonderful. We have writing club, but we call it donut club because we eat donuts whenever we do it, and he is helping me learn how to write sentences that are, like, two clauses. Did you know you can write a sentence that's only two clauses?

Erin (Guest): I've heard very, very, very subtle whispers of such things.

Hannah (Host): [laughter]

Erin (Guest): I wouldn't know myself.

Hannah (Host): So was this when you were writing a book that was not an explicitly academic book? Was this a fight for you to, like, get out of that impenetrable prose?

Erin (Guest): No, not really. I mean, I really, I've gone back and looked at the kind of work that I did in my master's thesis and my prose is impenetrable because I'm trying to walk the walk without actually knowing what it is that I'm saying and so I'm throwing it a lot—it's so classically like... if I can throw aporia and obfuscation into a sentence then probably I'm going to sound really smart because even I don't understand what I'm saying, and unfortunately that seems to work periodically? But it always fails in peer review. [laughter]

Hannah (Host): [laughter]

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Erin (Guest): So every time I tried to send an article in for publication, I would always get, you know, one reviewer back being like, "This has promise but there are some major blah blah blah" and then it's pretty like on point, like good suggestions, and then review like, "This person may possibly have been lobotomized—

Hannah (Host): [laughter]

Erin (Guest): "It's hard to say what it is they're talking about and I fear for their safety and the safety of others," and you know, I actually had a very mildly, like a very sort of slightly toned down version of that in a peer review once and I just thought to myself, like, it's because I don't really do academic writing particularly well, I think. And so writing the book was a much more kind of bloggy, chatty voice and the places where I really had, like I really got pushed by Julie Doosan was, you know, where I was being not chatty enough or when I sort of accidentally—I wasn't sure yet what it was that I was trying to say and so I fell into the obfuscation aporia kind of feint [laughter] and she was like, "Oh, you don't actually know what you're saying, so I'm going to ask you some hard questions and let's stay here for a bit." Yeah.

Hannah (Host): I feel like probably you have thought about this a lot before, but I have this really back and forth relationship between the sort of trappings of authority that are, you know, insisting people call you professor, writing in that kind of tone, you know, all of the other pieces of it, insurances on certain forms of formality... that is, you know, how do I put this? So I was chatting on the phone today with the producer for a local radio show called *Sense of Place*, which is a explicitly feminist and decolonial radio show hosted by a woman academic—

Erin (Guest): Minelle.

Hannah (Host): Minelle. Yeah, yeah, exactly. I'm going to be on it tomorrow.

Erin (Guest): She's amazing.

Hannah (Host): And uh, and I was chatting with her producer Abeer, who referred to me a couple of times as professor and I said, sort of self-effacingly like, "Oh, you can call me Hannah, like I'm not fancy enough for you to call me professor." And she said, "Oh, it's actually a really important policy of ours that we call particularly women academics who we speak to professor because they're much more likely to have that title taken away from them in media." And, you know, I thought about that and I thought about the way that I am always the first expected to tell my students to just call me Hannah and the first expected to make my work more accessible. Whereas I feel like men are both more ready to give up that authority because they didn't have to fight for it as hard, and also more comfortable sitting in it, and more likely to be comfortable being like, "Yeah, I'm a professor and I'm going to write illegible work and everybody's going to be fine with it." And how that feeling that like feminist work should be accessible at the level of language, like I believe that so strongly, and then also, I

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think are we giving something up when we say that our work will be accessible but not everybody's work needs to be? Do you know what I'm getting at here?

Erin (Guest): I think so. It makes me think a number of things which suggests to me that it's a really good idea that you've got, that you're onto something really important, right?

Hannah (Host): [laughter]

Erin (Guest): Because I'm like, oh I have, I have 1 million things that are rushing through my head at this moment. So the first thing that I think about when you talk about accessibility is what do we mean by accessibility? Like accessible to who and what kinds of work do the receptors or recipients of this knowledge have to do in order to access it? Right? Like is it accessible because you know, you've laid everything out and then they have, you know, the listener, the receiver of the information, has to come meet you there? That to me is accessible, right? Like if you've given all the tools and all of the keys and all of the, you know, the different ways of sort of approaching the information or the idea or the message that you're trying to give, or the doorway. Right? Like, a literal doorway. I mean, I think of an acquaintance of mine, Luke Anderson, who is an entrepreneur now in Toronto and has started creating these things called "stop gap" and it's a ramp for wheelchair accessibility into doorways and it's just like a ramp that's movable and everybody's, you know, like, "Oh my gosh, this is such a good idea." And he simply, you know, provided the tool that suddenly makes a doorway actually accessible to people with mobility differences and, you know, so I think like accessibility, if you were talking about how people come to the information, how you're laying it out and can, you know, can people pick it up if you've laid it down on the right way? Like that's one thing. The other thing I think about is, like, do we mean when we're talking about women and women-identified folks who are constantly in micro aggressive kind of ways being told that their information or the message or the words that they're giving have to be... they'd have to have to be sort of stripped of nuance and stripped of complexity or constantly available, you know, that's, that's totally different. I mean, I've very recently, like in the last 24 hours, had an email from a professor emeritus who's interested in auditing a class I'm teaching this fall, which is interesting, right? Um, and so, you know, I gave this person who by all accounts, by all the email markers, as much as you can tell, looks like a looks like a fella. Um, you know, "For sure. Yeah. Welcome. Yeah, join us in the class." And then I got an email today. "Great. Can I have your syllabus?" And my immediate sort of thought process when I read this email at six in the morning when I woke up and checked my phone, like you should all not do,

Hannah (Host): [laughter] But we're all doing it. Don't worry.

Erin (Guest): I was like, "Oh my God, my syllabus isn't ready." Like, "Oh my God, I have to put a syllabus together today for this person, this professor emeritus," and then I thought to myself, "What am I—" Yeah, of course I have a syllabus. I haven't plotted it out day by day because it's August 14th and I am a human like

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everyone else, and so finally the email that I gave myself permission to write was, "Dear so and so, I do have a syllabus. It'll be made available to all students on the first day of class when I'll go over it in detail. Sincerely." You know?

Hannah (Host): If you're also going to be a student in this class, you'll get it when the students get it.

Erin (Guest): Just like, wait a second, you're a student in the class. You don't get it any earlier than the first year students do. But my sort of default to like, "Oh my God, I have to give this fellow, who called me out, like this guy who has more seniority than me has called me up and I don't have my—Wait a second. My syllabus doesn't have to be ready. I don't have to be accessible to you on August 14th actually for free without doing the, you know, like it was just sort of like this strange experience.

Hannah (Host): That's so... you've gotten right at it, which is the thing that you are always uncannily able to do, which is there's this difference between being accessible in a way that is radical because it up-turns the deeply oppressive norms of who gets to occupy spaces and who doesn't, versus always being available to people who think that they deserve your time and energy. Like there's a different feminist praxis in saying, like, "I'm going to do this work such that people who have been deliberately excluded from it, it will be there for them" versus like, "I'm going to do this extra emotional labor for you because you have some extra right to my time and energy." Like those feel like they both fall under the word accessible, but they're deeply different things.

Erin (Guest): Yeah. Yeah. Like feminism and intersectional feminism and feminists who practice feminism are akin to public libraries but they are not the revolving door that you can go in 24/7. Right? There's an infrastructure to a public library and that infrastructure is not simply the mechanics of a constantly open doorway.

Hannah (Host): Yep, exactly. Libraries are closed sometimes. [laughter]

Erin (Guest): [laughter]

Hannah (Host): Like that's such a good—like libraries need to be profoundly accessible spaces, but that does not mean they're open 24/7.

Erin (Guest): No, no, no. And it doesn't mean that they don't have, like, ways of making the people who are facilitating their openness and their accessibility, availability—it doesn't mean that they—they must have ways of making those people's safe, valued, and have space for rest and recompense.

Hannah (Host): Yeah.

Erin (Guest): I'm super distracted by the fact that there's some rowdy-ism happening outside the window and here at miner's bay, as it says on the website, there's no rowdy-ism.

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Hannah (Host): Will you translate the word "rowdy-ism" for those of us—[laughter]

Erin (Guest): Well it's, I'm telling you, my friend, it's 10:11 on a Monday night and I hear a boat coming in with loud talking.

Hannah (Host): [gasp] A boat with loud talking?

Erin (Guest): Yeah, possibly some joviality. [laughter]

Hannah (Host): [laughter] Can you imagine such a thing?

Erin (Guest): No fun.

Hannah (Host): No. Everybody stop having fun. I mean, that's me most of the time. [laughter]

Erin (Guest): [laughter]

Hannah (Host): Would everybody please stop having fun? I require the utmost quiet.

Erin (Guest): Today, Ellie was super crooked when she woke up. I mean, the full moon was last Monday, but I feel like the reverberations are happening, right through this week, and I was like, "Don't you want to go have fun?" And she looks at me and she said, "No fun will be had" [laughter]

Hannah (Host): [laughter]

Erin (Guest): and I thought to myself, a) you're two. I'm terrified, and b) good grammar. Nice work. No fun will be had.

Hannah (Host): Yeah, no fun will be had. The grammar is amazing. Your child frequently says things that make me think that like, this is not her first rodeo, so to speak.

Erin (Guest): Oh, you're really gonna like this. The song that she's really into right now is "Don't be Denied" by Neil Young and she walks around, she doesn't know all the words, so she'd be like, "na na na na na, don't be denied," and then she'll walk up and she'll personalize it for whoever she is standing in front of, so she said to me today, "Don't be denied as a cow mama" and, like, I don't know where the cow came from, but you know, and you know, she walked up to my dad and said, "Papa don't be denied." [laughter]

Hannah (Host): [laughter]

Erin (Guest): And he took that like it was, you know, the Rosetta Stone of knowledge, going "Right, right." Meanwhile completely oblivious to the fact that, you know, she was walking around with a phone blasting Neil Young, singing this song.

Hannah (Host): "Don't be denied."

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- Erin (Guest): Don't be denied.
- Hannah (Host): Out of the mouths of babes.
- Erin (Guest): I tell you.
- Hannah (Host): Um, okay. We've already hit 20 minutes on this recording, which is how long these recordings are supposed to be.
- Erin (Guest): Right. Have I talked about anything that was not completely asinine?
- Hannah (Host): Yeah. It was all solid gold. Everything you say is brilliant. [laughter]
- Erin (Guest): [laughter] Lord have mercy.
- Hannah (Host): I don't know if you know this, but you are very smart.
- Erin (Guest): [laughter] Every time I express, it makes my forehead hurt.
- Hannah (Host): You laughed at that in the same way that I laughed when you asked if there was anything you could do for me. [laughter]
- Erin (Guest): [laughter]
- Hannah (Host): Like, what, what kind of question is that? [laughter] Oh, oh my god.
- Erin (Guest): I have these moments though, like I haven't said this to very many people—clearly I'm saying it while you're recording—but do you ever have these moments where you think to yourself, "I have hardly even scratched the surface of what I'm capable of." Like, I don't have them often. Most of the time I just feel like one hot mess and am one, but every now and then have these moments that feel either as though I'm on the edge of a mental health crisis or that I'm on the edge of a, sort of, a real kind of insightful moment, both of which I'm kind of familiar with and feel pretty comfortable with, and think to myself, like, I've only just started. I may not actually do anything other than this, but I have a full awareness that I'm capable of more. It's why that app is tailored for me, that exercise app, like "One more sprint, Wunker." [laughter]
- Hannah (Host): I don't know. I love that. I love those moments of feeling like you might be capable of more than you have given yourself credit for, that you have sort of circumscribed yourself too much and that there are all of these things you haven't imagined yet that you're going to get to think and do and say and experience, which is like the part of aging that I find exciting sometimes?
- Erin (Guest): Oh my gosh. And, to go back to what you were saying before you started your recording, like, the tonic and absolute witchcraft that is friendship, you know? I mean, getting to be and talk with your friends, like getting to talk with you and

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have this sort of... it's like the most selfless navel-gazing that is possible in some ways, right? Because you get to be your best or worst, but like most amplified, witnessed version of yourself, and there are times when that happens and you're being like a really strong version of you— whatever version that is—and somebody else is seeing it and being the really strong version of themselves and then you see each other and then some super magic happens and... it's just, you know, you make something or you form a wrinkle in your memory of each other and you just get printed there and it's just pretty amazing. So yeah, I'm really glad that we're friends.

Hannah (Host): Yeah. Same. [Music: "Leather Jacket" by Thunderbitch]

Hannah (Host): To hear more about Erin, you can follow her on Twitter @erinwunker or check out her writing at the beautifully re-designed HookandEye.ca. I've linked to a couple of my particular favorite pieces in the show notes. You can find those notes and all the episodes of *Secret Feminist Agenda* on secretfeministagenda.com. You can follow me on Twitter @hkpmcgregor and tweet about the podcast using the hashtag #secretfeministagenda, and keep reading and reviewing and sharing the podcast. You are the reason why we're finding new listeners every week and I love you for it. The podcast theme song is "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans off their album, *Chub Rub*. You can download the entire album on freemusicarchive.org, or follow them on Facebook. Erin's theme song is "Leather Jacket" by Thunderbitch. When I asked her what her theme song was, she sent me a absolutely magical picture of her with her daughter when her daughter was an infant, informing me that the two of them have a long history of listening to Thunder Bitch together, so it's a sentimental call. Anyway, that's it for this week, my darlings. This has been *Secret Feminist Agenda*. Pass it on. [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans]