

Episode 2.1 White Feminists & Listening to Criticism

January 19, 2018

Hannah (Host): [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans] Hey, there. A little note before this episode begins, this version of *Secret Feminist Agenda* 2.1 has been modified from its original version. Made a couple of changes that I want to note upfront. One is that I went through and correct my pronunciation of the Ktunaxa nation in light of some listeners very helpfully pointing out to me that I was saying it super wrong. The other thing that I did is go through and cut out a couple of asides that I felt were detracting from the argument the episode is making. Other than that, it's largely in its original shape, so enjoy. [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans]

Hi, I'm Hannah McGregor and this is *Secret Feminist Agenda*. I am thrilled to be back with season two of the podcast and many more contemplations of the mundane, nefarious, or even insidious ways we enact feminism in our daily lives. Last night I spent two hours reading the beautiful, thoughtful, generous, encouraging feedback so many of you left on the first season. So before we get started, let me tell you about a few changes I'll be making to the podcast in response. First, a little format shift. Most of you agreed that you'd like the interviews to be a little longer. I want to do that, and here's how I'm going to try to make it possible. Odd numbered episodes like this one are going to be minisodes featuring my own secret feminist agenda, plus regular installments of Kaarina's Cozy Self Care Corner. Even numbered episodes are going to feature interviews with a whole range of awesome new guests starting next week with Sylvie Vigneux and Kendra Marks talking about feminist friendship and organizing in law school. By only doing an interview every second week, I can build in the time to make those interviews a little longer and won't feel as much pressure to be finding new guests on a weekly basis. And the second change by popular demand, despite Kaarina and my deep fondness for it, we're switching up the self care corner intro. You all are just really spooked by loons I guess. [Sound effect: Loon Hoots]

All right, I have a glass of wine. I just took a loaf of gingerbread out of the oven. The cats have temporarily stopped yelling, so now it's time for me to tell you what my secret feminist agenda is this week. [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans] And it is listening to criticism. This is a hard thing to do. It's a hard thing to do privately in our relationships with individuals. It is a hard thing to do publicly. We're human and we can fuck up, and not all women are located equally, obviously. Race and disability and sexual orientation and class locate us differently in relation to one another, and being a woman doesn't make you immune from abusing power, or being part of oppressive systems. It also doesn't make you immune from being an asshole. But I want to talk about listening to criticism in public forums. I want to talk about what it means to speak publicly and then to have people tell you that you did a bad job and what you do with that. In part I'm building here on Marcelle's really thoughtful

comments at the beginning of the most recent episode of *Witch, Please*. And I'll link to that in the show notes. I also included a clip of that in the live talk that I did about accountability in public scholarship. It's a really beautiful, thoughtful introduction where she talks about the experience of having been called upon to right a wrong and the way that makes us feel. The way it can make us feel really, really awful. The way it can make us sort of conflate having made a mistake that's indicative of having internalized some oppressive ideas with like being actual monsters, because, you know, we're not monsters when we make mistakes, but when somebody tells you you've made a mistake, you need to at least listen and you need to think about it., and ideally your response should be thoughtful rather than defensive, particularly when you're somebody in the public realm. Nobody's forcing you to do that. Nobody's forcing you. Nobody can actually make you be thoughtful or compassionate. Nobody can make you listen to other people. The more power you have, the fewer metrics there are for actually holding you accountable.

So let's say you are a person who holds some level of privilege and/or some level of power in whatever community that you're working in, and let's say that you're trying really hard to do a good job. You think that you're doing everything right, or you hope that you're doing everything right, or you're doing everything as well as you can, and then somebody comes along and says, "you did a bad job, and you hurt me in this way." You have a few different options: to lash out, to get defensive, to use your power and privilege to try to silence your critics, or you can pause. You can listen. You can think about it. You can try really hard to understand where that person's coming from, and you can maybe try to do a little better, especially when those critiques are coming from a marginalized position or a marginalized perspective that you don't share. A perspective that you can't necessarily inhabit. There's been a number of really ugly and really public examples in the past few months of white self-identified feminist women doing incredibly shitty jobs of listening to criticism. And these are actually, you know what, I'm only thinking of Canadian examples. There's probably a ton of international examples too, but in our modest nation, there has been three real public shit shows, all of which have to do with white women using the kinds of power that comes from our whiteness and other kinds of power that have to do with, with class, with cultural capital, with proximity to powerful institutions, with access to media, with the support of powerful men backing them. And in all three of these examples, these women faced difficult and complex circumstances, and arguably misstepped, and in the face of being taken to task for those missteps, have responded by taking the power and privilege that they have and using those to increase the violence and damage of their original missteps.

So the three examples that I'm thinking of are Lindsay Shepherd, Angie Abdou, and Margaret Atwood. I don't want to go very far into Lindsay Shepherd because that's a really, really complex case for a lot of reasons. What I do want to highlight is that sort of her recurring theme now that she's a bit of a social media celebrity, has been, "I used to be a leftist, but all of these hysterical far left people are really causing me to rethink my stance." And what most

hysterical far left people have been doing is asking her to think about her privilege as a cis woman and violence against trans people. The second example, Angie Abdou is a Canadian author who wrote a novel called *In Case I Go*, which is about the Ktunaxa nation. And Abdou was sort of prominently featured in the media and celebrated for the degree to which she went out of her way to consult with the nation, or with members of the nation about the novel itself and how she, you know, revised the novel as she went in response to these consultations.

And she was really being sort of celebrated as having done a really great job in the mainstream media. The novel came out and a number of Indigenous critics, including members of the Ktunaxa nation responded and said, "we're not comfortable with what she had written." And the response to this is a lengthy article by Jonathan Kay. The article is called "'Canada Has Gone Mad': Indigenous Representation and the Hounding of Angie Abdou". "Canada has gone mad" is a direct quote from Abdou herself who says, quote "Canada has gone mad. From any other country this looks like pure insanity. The idea of the novel, as we once knew it, is dead. You can quote me on that," end quote. So one, using madness as a metaphor for people disagreeing with you is ableist bullshit. Two, attributing critique as a sign of nationwide madness is a narcissistic overreaction, to say the least.

But what I want to highlight is a paragraph later in the article where Kay says, "From what I can tell, she's an across-the-board progressive on pretty much every issue imaginable. Though her recent experiences are giving her second thoughts about some of the more doctrinaire postures governing Canadian cultural life. She tells me." End quote again. So there's that same thing again, right? I used to be a leftist, I used to be a feminist. I used to be on board, but all of these recent experiences are really starting to cause me to doubt those previous perspectives. That same, "well I tried really hard and it didn't make you people happy, and so I guess I give up forever and there's no pleasing you and I'm just not going to care anymore." Let me tell you about third example. The third example was Margaret Atwood, who, gosh, I, I hardly know how to begin to unpack UBC Accountable and what has been going on for the past over a year, but essentially a creative writing professor was fired.

There were allegations of sexual assault, as well as general abuse and misconduct towards students. The case was reviewed by a judge. The actual notes of the case have not been made public because there are very strict confidentiality rules. The professor himself made some of those notes public, which violation of confidentiality rules, and also which nobody can double check against the actual notes of the case because they're confidential. But in his statement, he said that there was no evidence supporting it. Margaret Atwood and about 80 other very powerful and well known Canadian authors signed an open letter casting strong doubt on the legitimacy of the allegations against this professor. Now I want you to imagine you are a young woman, emerging writer, a student in a creative writing program, and you confidentially go to your university to tell that the head of this program who has a huge amount of power

over you, has been abusive towards you in some way, and that professor who has a lot of power over you leaks the details of the case.

And then the most powerful author in your quite small nation publicly casts doubt on you. It's a phenomenal example of somebody thoughtlessly using their power to harm others. The original events, the original signing of the UBC Accountable letter happened in November of 2016. So over a year later, and Margaret Atwood has written a editorial in *The Globe and Mail*, which is big national paper in Canada called "Am I a Bad Feminist?" Which P.S. Roxane Gay totally tweeted about it and was like, "yeah, that's not what I meant by bad feminist, Margaret," which was amazing. And in it she essentially has a sort of multi paragraph snit about how she's obviously a bad feminist and the good feminists who are accusing her insist that she's, you know, a monster. But I actually want to quote a tweet that she posted the day after this editorial came out and it says, "Taking a break from being Supreme Being Goddess, omniscient, omnipotent, and responsible for all ills. Sorry I have failed the world so far on gender equality. Maybe stop trying? Will be back later. (Next incarnation maybe.)" Which sounds an awful lot to me like "I used to be progressive on every issue imaginable, but I'm starting to give it second thoughts given recent events." It sounds to me like these women are all saying remarkably similar things, which is "I was good and somebody criticized me so fine. Fine. I guess I'll just stop. I guess I'll just stop caring about anybody who isn't me." which is like literally the opposite of what people are asking you. Like what people are saying is "your actions have hurt me and I would like to call on you to do better," and when somebody says "your actions have hurt me and I want to call on you to do better," and your response is "Fine, I give up. I guess I'll just never try again." What that tells me and a lot of people is that you weren't doing those things in the first place because you cared about other people. You were doing them because you wanted to look good and if you're not going to get praised for it, if it's not gonna make you look good anymore, then you'll just stop. Okay. That might be. That might be unfair. I mean Atwood at least has spent a career writing books that have meant a lot to a lot of people, but in this moment, if she would stop and really, really listen to the many women who have talked to her and said, "you're actions are hurting us. Your actions are making us feel unsafe." I think her stance would be different. I think for most of us, if we stopped and listened to people and thought about where their pain was coming from, if we took a deep breath before reacting and thought what people are actually asking of us our reactions would be different.

I think our reactions for the most part would be more compassionate. And that can be really, really hard to do. But if you are a white woman and do you have a platform, then too fucking bad. I don't care how hard it is. I worry a lot about being a quasi-public feminist myself. I mean, I'm no fucking Margaret Atwood obviously, but I have power. I have privilege. I'm white. I'm middle class. I'm a university professor. I'm able bodied and cis. There's a lot of ways in which I move through the world with ease, that is not an ease the other people share. And I'm for sure for sure gonna fuck up. I have fucked up, obviously. And probably my responses have not always been as compassionate as they could

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be, but I'm gonna keep trying really hard. And I'm going to take these three women as an example of the kinds of damage that you can do when you are wielding power thoughtlessly, whether that's a very small amount of power or a comparatively large amount of power. And hopefully I will one day be another white woman saying, "well, I was a leftist, but some people were mean to me. So fuck that forever." [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans] Okay. That was a lot. So I think it's time to check in with Kaarina. [Music: "I Will" by Mitski]

Kaarina:

Hello and welcome to Kaarina's Cozy Self Care Corner. So welcome back listeners. Thank you for all your amazing feedback on Twitter and on the *Secret Feminist Agenda* website. First thing I want to talk about is what the segment will look like going forward. So I cannot continue to bring you advice on self care for every episode. I don't have that much expertise and I don't know what you need. What I need is not necessarily what you need. And so this isn't always going to be a place of where you can get tips and tricks and reassurance, cuz I don't always have that to give. I'm gonna to continue to think of it as a place to acknowledge things that I second guess in myself and that I see the people around me second guessing, to validate my experiences and hopefully your experiences too. And maybe to just share some of the ways that I'm coping or thriving. So right now I'm really sad. I think the technical term is depressed, and I'm doing everything right in order to treat my depression. Take my meds. I'm talking to people and exercising regularly. I'm eating as well as I can. I'm socializing and volunteering and leaving my house. It's not helping. I'm still really sad and tired and everything's really hard. And I don't need your pity. That's not what I'm here for, but I just want to acknowledge that sometimes we're just sick and we need to wait it out. And something that's helping me with that is this wonderful quote from Marge Simpson. So there's an episode of *The Simpsons* when Lisa is really sad. And I can't remember why she's sad, but she's sad and Marge says to her, "If you want to be sad, honey, be sad. We'll ride it out with you and when you get finished feeling sad we'll still be there. From now on, let me do the smiling for both of us." So that's Marge Simpson. There are a lot of people in my life who waited out with me and who bring me their love and their energy and their happiness and their support and count on the fact that this period will pass and someday I'll be able to give some of that back to them. And that's what I'm counting on right now. Thanks for your feedback and your enthusiasm. Thanks for bringing your energy and your appreciation to my segment and to this podcast. Someday I'm going to feel happy again and I'm going to try and bring that energy. [Music: "I Will" by Mitski] Have a great weekend.

Hannah (Host):

As always, even find show notes and all the episodes of *Secret Feminist Agenda* on secretfeministagenda.com. You can follow me on Twitter @hkpmcgregor. You can follow Kaarina @Kaarinasaurus. And you can tweet about the podcast using the hashtag #secretfeministagenda. And why don't you help to start the new season off with a splash by leaving a rating or a review on your pod catcher of choice. 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. Kaarina's theme song is "I Will" by Mitski. That's it

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for now. This has been *Secret Feminist Agenda*. [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans] Pass it on.