

Episode 2.17 Brooklyn Nine-Nine

May 11, 2018

Hannah (Host): [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans] Hi, I'm Hannah McGregor and this is *Secret Feminist Agenda*. Welcome back. Sorry, this one is late. I'm just so, so tired. We're right in the weird liminal space between the teaching semester ending and my research semester beginning, and I'm amping up for conferences. I'm heading to Regina in a couple of weeks and then Montreal after that. And I always find conference travel energizing and exciting, and it really helps to sort of kick my brain over into research semester mode, but right now just the exhaustion of the past semester is hitting me so hard and there's nothing quite urgent enough to sort of give me that anxious energy that helps me get through my days and so I'm just fighting the urge to sleep for 14 hours. And honestly like, why am I fighting it? Maybe I should just be sleeping for 14 hours, like I'm really tired. Anyway, part of that exhaustion is manifesting for me as really struggling to come up with minisode topics. I feel like my brain is just pretty burned at this point, but last night an announcement came out that I just knew I had to talk about. So my secret feminist agenda this week, it's renewing *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*. [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans]

For those of you who don't know, yesterday— that's May 10th— it was announced that the Fox sitcom *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* was not going to be renewed for a season. There was an instant widespread outpouring of love for the show and devastation at its cancellation all over social media. And it looks pretty likely that a service like Hulu or Netflix will end up picking it up, sort of like they did with *The Mindy Project*. So all hope is not lost. The show is obviously well loved. But in the meantime, my Twitter feed has been full of people talking about what makes this show so special and so remarkable and so loved by so many people. So in case you don't watch it, *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* is a workplace comedy half hour sitcom. It's sort of in the vein of *The Office* and *Parks and Recreation*. It was actually created by Dan Gore and Michael Shore who are the *Parks and Rec* creators. And a lot of the things that make people love this show are similar to what people love about *Parks and Rec*. So it centers on this unlikely group of coworkers, who are mostly really passionate about what they do, who are mostly quite competent at their jobs, and who also really love each other and want each other to be happy. I do kind of think that we have this, this contemporary genre that's sort of like, nice sitcom genre. Sitcoms that are characterized by humor that is rarely of at the expense of other characters, *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* falls squarely in that camp. And one of the best things about those sitcoms, where the humor isn't about being at the expense of other characters, is that it avoids really cheap shots, particularly sort of identity-based comedy cheap shots at people for being, for how they look or for gender or race or sexuality. So that niceness and that, that empathy and that kindness that characterize the show is definitely part of what makes it so popular. But the other really key thing is that it is a meaningfully diverse show, not tokenistic-ly, but at the very heart of it. The protagonists include two Black men, one of

whom is gay, two Latina women, one of whom is also queer, and those identities are at the heart of the storylines and the heart of the character, so they're not asides, they're not incidental. They also don't fully define the characters, they're just part of who they are and the show handles identity, and how it informs people's relationships, and how it informs workplace dynamics, and how it informs everybody's relationship to policing in particular, in these really subtle and smart ways. Kate Leth on Twitter described the show as a Trojan horse that uses the sort of main character Jake Peralta, who is this, you know, cocky, white dude, detective sort of covers up what the show is actually about, which is all of these other characters. But another Twitter thread that I'll link to on the show notes pointed out that Jake's journey is also really, really central to the show. So he starts off as being this emotionally immature, cocky action hero kind of figure, who's obsessed with *Die Hard*, but as the show progresses, it's really about Jake moving away from the action heroes stereotype towards greater and greater emotional intelligence, including a really special Christmas episode where he's given the opportunity to reenact *Die Hard*, and sort of gives away the hero role to his friend because he knows that that's what will actually fix the situation, despite his desire to sort of picture himself as this masculine stereotype. In the most recent season he spent some time in prison and there's a storyline about him becoming more hesitant about the criminal justice system that is so well handled. But of course I think for me and for a lot of us, Jake isn't the reason we watch the show. We watched the show for Rosa, the badass, terrifying, bisexual Latina woman. We watch it for Captain Holt, the incredibly hilarious, deadpan gay, Black captain of the Nine-Nine. We watch it for Terry Jeffords, played by Terry Crews so brilliantly, who is characterized by sweetness and kindness. There's so much, there's so much about the show that is so beautiful. And I asked people last night to tell me a little bit about their favorite episodes or favorite moments in the show, and I just want to read you a couple of these. So Sharon @pensif said, "Not a specific episode, but I am forever grateful that they pivoted hard from Boyle in love with Rosa and recognized how creepy that trope is." So to follow up on that, the show let's it go so quickly, and it lets it go by like, you know, having them talk about it and work through it and then move on, and have a friendship that's about mutual respect and care. And ultimately his creepy obsession with her isn't rewarded or sanctioned as acceptable behavior. It's really pushed aside as part of him sort of growing into who he's going to be as a character. Not Your Office Manager or @ray_larson wrote, "I just watched 'The Apartment' where Gina shows again how completely fulfilling and together her life is while helping Jake, not because it's expected of her, but to honor her connection with another woman. His Nana." I mean, I've even talked about Gina yet. Gina is played by Chelsea Peretti. She's super, super funny, but maybe the best thing about Gina is the way that she's constantly being underestimated by the detectives. She's the only main character who's not a detective, and yet she has this remarkable emotional intelligence and capacity to understand what's going on with the characters that's consistently highlighted and rewarded in the show, including these moments, you know, where we might be tempted to sort of treat Gina like a bit of a joke, we instead see that she's this amazing, successful, rich, and nuanced figure. Hannah or @thebalesasaurus— no idea how to say that— said,

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"I really love the moment in the slaughterhouse where Jake and Rosa are competing for the spot on Hawkins' squad and Rosa tells Jake how she really wants to work for a badass woman because all her C.O.s ever have been men and Jake gets it." So getting it I think is one of the really key things about the show. Is that because it's so relationship driven, because it is about these different people listening to each other and valuing each other, there's so many moments in which somebody speaks about their experiences, experiences that are not necessarily the experiences of other characters, and those characters get it. And for me, one of the most powerful examples of that is the episode that's often cited as the sort of masterpiece of the series, which is called "Moo Moo." That season four, episode 16. So in "Moo Moo," Sergeant Jeffords— that's Terry Crews's character— is looking at taking on more responsibilities, sort of moving his career forward. He's applied for this city council liaison position and right in the midst of this— he's out in his neighborhood looking for his twin daughters have lost their favorite stuffed toy— so he's out looking for it and he encounters a white male cop who aggressively arrests him for absolutely no reason other than that he is a Black man. And the next day at work he tells his colleagues, you know, "I was arrested last night," and they get it right away. [Begin Audio Clip: "Moo Moo"]

Rosa: What's wrong?

Sgt. Jeffords: I got stopped by a cop last night.

Rosa: Stopped for what?

Sgt. Jeffords: Stopped for walking.

Rosa: Let me zero sense, unless. Oh crap, I see what happened.

Sgt. Jeffords: Yeah.

Jake: Sarge, that's terrible.

Gina: That's so messed up.

Scully: Oh Geez. I have no idea what's going on.

Hitchcock: He got stopped for being Black. Get woke, Scully. [End Audio Clip: "Moo Moo"]

Hannah (Host): They know what happened. They know why. They not only don't doubt his story, but he barely even needs to tell it before they understand and hear him and hear the implications of what he's telling them. Which is also remarkable because it is a show about cops, which demonstrates to us that these are cops who also know how fucked up policing itself is and the forms of violence that structure policing. But for me, even more important than that capacity of these characters to understand where each other are coming from despite their

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differences, is the characters who are able to have meaningful conversations about experiences that they share. Which is to say, because the show isn't tokenizing people, people can have shared interactions. So there's multiple queer characters who get to have interactions with each other about queerness. There's multiple Black men on the show who get to have conversations about masculinity, multiple women of color who get to talk to each other about being women of color in the workplace, and this feels incredibly revolutionary for a mainstream sitcom to not only build in a sort of tokenistic version of diversity, but to build in the capacity for these relationships in these conversations. So in "Moo Moo" for example, what we get is a series of really remarkable conversations between Sergeant Jeffords and Captain Holt about being Black men and working in the police force, and how one goes about trying to make policing better. So essentially Sargent Jeffords wants to lodge a complaint about having been profiled by this other cop because he knows it was a bad arrest. He knows that this was bad policing, and Captain Holt advises him against it. [Begin Audio Clip: "Moo Moo"]

Captain Holt: There's politics to being a cop.

Sgt. Jeffords: But I wasn't harassed for being a cop. I was harassed as a Black man.

Captain Holt: I'm not saying do nothing. I'm saying the most powerful action you can take as the rise through the ranks so that you can make large scale changes. I've had to pick my battles and it hasn't always been easy, but now I have my own precinct. A precinct who's officers would never do to you with Officer Maldack did. [End Audio Clip: "Moo Moo"]

Hannah (Host): And Sergeant Jeffords isn't sure. You know, he questions how long it will take to make change that way. So they have that initial conversation where they talk about sort of immediate action versus holding out and trying to make systemic change by moving yourself into a position of power, but then later on in the episode, Captain Holt changes his mind. [Begin Audio Clip: "Moo Moo"]

Captain Holt: I've thought a lot about our conversation. When I was a young police officer and things like this would happen to me I felt very alone. I wanted to call out every bad cop I encountered, and there were a lot, but as a Black gay man, I never had a superior who was on my side. So the advice I offered you that came from a different place, a different time. I put all my energy towards rising to a rank where I could make a difference. Well, I'm there now. And I realize that if I don't back you up on this, I would be betraying the very thing that I worked so hard for, so I filed a complaint.

Sgt. Jeffords: I appreciate that. Captain.

Captain Holt: Are you still upset?

Sgt. Jeffords: No, not at all.

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Captain Holt: You should consider modifying your handshake. It's sending the wrong message.

Sgt. Jeffords: Copy that. [End Audio Clip: "Moo Moo"]

Hannah (Host): So in the end, Sergeant Jeffords doesn't get the liaison job and he has to ask himself if ultimately he made the right call, and the episode doesn't really comfortably arrive at a conclusion about what the right action was. Instead it, it lets it be true that Captain Holt and Sergeant Jeffords made different choices that they can respect each other's choices, and most importantly that they can sit down and have conversations about them based on the shared experience and the shared negotiation of the power dynamics of their workplace and of the world, and that it's not premised in them explaining their positions to somebody who doesn't get it. It's premised in them starting from shared experience. And I got to say, I think, I think about this episode a lot, particularly in terms of that conversation about, you know, whether we should play it safe in order to get ourselves into positions where we can make more change, or whether we can afford to wait that long. That's the question. I asked myself a lot and it's a question I think the show grapples with in really, really smart ways. The other episodes that got pointed out a lot when I asked people about their favorites and that are probably my personal favorites as well, that will be the annual Halloween heist episodes. So starting in season one, this tradition begins where characters are sort of pitted off against each other to prove who's the better detective by attempting to steal something from one another. And I really want to avoid spoiling a ton of the show if you haven't watched it yet, because every season, the way the heist turns out is different from the season before in smart and interesting ways that are predominantly comments on the characters relationships with each other, and on sort of what forms of intelligence are being valued and which ones are maybe being unfairly undervalued. And so the show is constantly sort of shifting the idea of sort of what constitutes skill and intelligence in the context of, of being a detective, but also in the context of, of interpersonal relationships, which is again, the show values, emotional intelligence in multiple ways. So a really cool thing about the heist episodes is that every one of them has a sort of B-plot that is about one of the characters learning to be kinder to another one. So for example, in the season one Halloween heist episode, there's a subplot where Amy Santiago really hates Halloween and Charles Boyle really loves it, and it ends with Amy feeling bad that she's ruined this fun for him and throwing a costume party for him. In season two, it's about a Sergeant Jeffords supporting Gina in her passion for dance. Season three has this really, really cute *Babysitter Club* subplot. But the way that the show keeps pairing the heist with these bonding friendship moments reminds us that sort of the key thing that underpins everything else that's happening in the show is these characters capacity to love and to care for each other across these barriers of difference, even when those differences are, you know, silly. It sort of creates a foundation for more meaningful conversation across difference, right? It uses sort of surface or humorous differences as a way of building up a sort of platform for these more meaningful conversations that can happen. All of which is to say, the show is brilliant. If you haven't watched it yet, please, please go watch it. The first four seasons are on Netflix in Canada. I

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don't know about the rest of the world. But do watch it and let's all go sign a couple of petitions and see if we can get it renewed. [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans] You know, who else loves *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*? Kaarina. Let's go talk to her for awhile. [Music: "I Will" by Mitski]

Kaarina:

Hello and welcome to Kaarina's Cozy Self Care Corner. So thank you to everybody who responded to my request for thoughts on anti-capitalist self care and self care for caregivers. Your responses were really great. I really appreciated the time you took to think about that and tell me about that. And both of those topics require more attention than I can give right now, so there'll be coming up in future episodes. Today I just want to talk about some minor coping strategies and using right now to deal with all of the stress in my life. Coping strategy number one, set small, achievable, enjoyable goals for yourself that are low stakes. So sometimes my partner and I set dog goals, which are a list of dogs that we want to see that day. So today my dog goals were a German shepherd and a fluffy white dog of any size. And if I see those dogs I'm going to be really happy, and if I don't see those dogs I'll probably see other great dogs. So it's a totally win-win situation. It gives me something to think about during the day, something nice to look forward to in the morning. And at the end of the day I can go back to my partner and say, "I saw that dog," or "I didn't see that dog, but I saw this tiny black dog that was the bomb." So dog goals, set it, dream it. Coping strategy number two, watch or listen to Janelle Monae's *Dirty Computer* as often as possible. Yeah. That one speaks for itself. Nothing but joy to be found on that beautiful album and Emotion Picture. Coping strategy number three, write emotional coping time into your to do list and day plan. Most days in the last week I wrote "crying" on my to do list, and some days I did it and then I got to cross it off, and some days I didn't do it and that was okay too. It's always something that can be put off till the next day. If I acknowledge in advanced that those things might happen and they might take time. It makes me feel better. And as much as I enjoyed crying and appreciate it, if I reach the end of the day and I haven't cried, that's pretty cool too. So those are my coping strategies this week. I'd love to hear yours if you have any right now, or just tweet me if you're a dog goals @kaarinasaurus or hashtag #secretfeministagenda. Have a great weekend.

Hannah (Host):

As always, you can 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. Also, don't forget to rate and review the show had on to iTunes. Give it a five star rating and a review. Without that, it stays sort of somewhere in the pit of itunes and is really hard for other people to find. So help people find it. The podcast theme song is measured 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. *Secret Feminist Agenda* is recorded on the traditional and unceded territory of the Musqueam, Squamish, Tsleil-Waututh first nations, where I'm grateful to live and work. This has been *Secret Feminist Agenda*. Pass it on. [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans].