

## Episode 3.29 Feminist Anecdotes

May 10, 2019

Hannah (Host): [00:00](#) [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans] Hi, I'm Hannah McGregor and this is *Secret Feminist Agenda*. And here we are on the last minisode of season three. I am exhausted from two weeks of work travel. I have a head cold and I'm not going to lie to you. I am looking forward to a short period of rest from this project, which I love very much, but which is also a kind of feat of endurance. The weekly nature of the podcast introduces challenges that are really different from, from other kinds of work that I do and there's some really beautiful things about that challenge. The podcasts forces me to think and work in ways that I haven't necessarily had to do previously, but it forecloses other possibilities let's say, and I'm looking forward to exploring some of those possibilities. The summer that was also vague. What I really mean is I want to do some more writing and it's really hard to get ready done when I'm doing this every week, but don't worry, this isn't the end by any means. I'm definitely coming back at least for a fourth season because there's too many interesting people. I still want to talk to it. Feminists, stop being so interesting. So this minisode and the next episode, which is the final episode of the season, well they're, they're continuing some of the work that this last cluster has been doing. So there was a, a small cluster that was thinking specifically about podcasting as public intellectual labor. And then for a couple of episodes I looked really specifically at Sara Ahmed's work in different genres of feminist knowledge production. And now these last two episodes are going to offer really specific responses to aspects of the peer review from season to a. That's both because I want to make space for answering peer review more openly and incorporating it into the thinking of the podcast. But it's also because I think there is, there's an arc, there is a connection between how the peer review has asked me to think about the kind of work podcasting does and how and why and the other kinds of conversations that I've been trying to open up in these last few episodes. Again about feminists knowledge production and the kinds of shapes that it can take. So that's what I'm going to be doing in this episode. Here we go. [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans]

Hannah (Host): [02:43](#) Okay. I want to talk today about the anecdote, and this is really specifically prompted by a point that Anna Polleti made in her peer review of season two. So I'm going to read you a longish quote from that peer review, just to give you some context and

if you want to actually read the whole response, I'll link to it in the show notes. Quote, "In the long tradition within feminist and queer scholarship in the humanities and social sciences that examines the forms knowledge takes, there is a strong thread of critical reflection on the genres you use to think with and to communicate our thinking. Jane Gallop's anecdotal theory; Lauren Berlant's work on the case and the scenes; Sara Ahmed's current thinking about complaint; Donna Haraway's theory of situated knowledges; and Audre Lorde's suggestion that poetry is not a luxury, for example. Secret Feminist Agenda is enacting a political and intellectual commitment to this tradition by utilizing the modes of address and storytelling that are the staple of the most successful forms of nonfictional podcasting, such as *This American Life* and *The Moth*. While McGregor never names this form explicitly, I would suggest that she has working with the genre of the anecdote. Very early on in my listening to the podcast, I began to wonder what function the anecdote plays in the project's scholarly objectives. Does McGregor seek to alter scholarly knowledge by bringing it into the existing genre of the anecdote, i.e. trying to reshape knowledge so that it fits this quotidian genre, or is she reworking the anecdote to demonstrate genre itself can produce knowledge, and if so, what kind of knowledge does it produce? I ask these questions not to suggest I know the answer, but to prompt some thinking about the role of the anecdote in the podcast and its scholarly objectives, both in terms of being recognized as scholarly, i.e. making a contribution to the field of feminist intellectual and cultural practice, and in functioning as a form of communication about scholarship," end quote.

Hannah (Host):

[04:40](#)

So as requested. I'm going to do some thinking about the genre of the anecdote and the kind of work that I think that it's doing for me in this podcast specifically. The first place that I want to go with the anecdote is the way that it has, for me, been a teaching tool. That is very much where the anecdote as a genre that does a particular kind of work, sort of, first entered my lexicon of scholarly thinking, sort of, first became something that I really drew on specifically as a scholar. And that is really the way that anecdotes offer a specific point of access to often incredibly complex, potentially overwhelming ideas or theories when I'm asking students to grapple with those ideas or theories. So starting at the level of the, the broadly conceptual is often alienating. It doesn't give people a point of entry. Beginning with the anecdote, on the other hand, offers a really sort of specific instance of an idea or a problem that can then be unpacked. And even as I'm saying this, my urge because I'm in the sort of pedagogical teaching mode and I'm trying to

explain something, my urge is to go immediately to the anecdote, right? So, so for example, what I am trying to talk about institutional power and Foucault's idea about how we learn to govern ourselves and are taught to do so by institutions, I generally talk to my students about the classroom. I situate that broad theoretical idea in the specificity of a lived experience, and ideally one that my students might be able to relate to so that they will see that lived experience and will have a, sort of, shared point of entry from which we can unpack this, this larger more complex idea. Now that right there points to one of the, the complexities of the anecdote as an intellectual genre, and that is that, at least in terms of the way that I have used it in teaching, it invites or presumes something about shared knowledge, that if my anecdote is going to make sense to you, you have to, you have to recognize it. There has to be something, something shared there. You know, this has become, in some obvious ways, more complex for me as I have gotten older and I have fewer shared cultural touchstones with my students. I'm less likely to watch the same movies as them or to watch the same TV as them. But it is obviously, of course, a complication across cultural difference as well that when my students come, for example from China and have grown up immersed in a totally different cultural environment than I have again, I'll often sort of lack those shared cultural touchstones. Interestingly, I think in that situation the anecdote doesn't so much fail as it needs to be nuanced. So when I give the anecdote that I think unpacks something, I have to place myself in that anecdote. I have to explain it a bit more from a more situated perspective. I have to contextualize in a way that makes it clear that I don't think that anecdote is universal, that it's about me and my particular experience, and in response I often ask students to come up with their own anecdotes. And that invitation to say, "tell me about a time you felt this way," or "tell me about a time when this kind of thing happened to you." That's another really key teaching tool for me because it allows students to root the kinds of ideas that we're working on unpacking in their own particular experience, which is again, very helpful. And I think that's where that turn to both my own anecdotal thinking in the podcast, but also my invitation towards guests to tell about a time that X happened, where that comes from. That I want to situate my own thinking in particular experiences, but I also want to invite them to situate their thinking in rooted experiences. And that points back towards the way that, that anecdotes can facilitate shared knowledge. In this case, maybe not because I immediately recognize myself in the anecdotes my guests share, but because their anecdotes again, help to sort of open out their worlds for me, particularly at the points where their worlds consist of experiences and

knowledges that are not mine because I haven't had the same life as them. So I certainly think that that part of what's going on with the, the anecdote in *Secret Feminist Agenda* is, is about teaching and about how many of my intellectual tools come from the classroom. That's where I've learned to explain things, but also how to think things through clearly with a community of other thinkers coming from a variety of different positions. And in so far as the anecdote is pedagogical, a classroom tool, I think it automatically becomes scholarly because what we're doing in the classroom is scholarly work. It's scholarly knowledge work. Despite the fact that the work that we do in the classroom tends to be valued less than the work that we do that falls under the general rubric of research. You know, that's the, that's the scholarship that's taken more seriously by a lot of universities. So in a larger sense, I think Poletti's right here that I am kind of reworking the anecdote to demonstrate that the genre can produce knowledge and that that knowledge can count as scholarly. So that invites the question, and that's the next question Poletti's asks of, "what kind of knowledge does the anecdote produce?" And to really think about that, about the knowledge the anecdote produces. I did a little bit of reading. And I want to talk now specifically about an article that Kaarina sent me. It's by Melissa Gregg and it is called "A Mundane Voice." It's a, it's a scholarly article, which is specifically about the anecdote as a way of situating knowledge, while also potentially expanding the audience for academic work. So it's about what the mundane and the anecdotal does for cultural theorists. And I was struck when Kaarina sent this to me, I was struck by the presence of the word "mundane" right there in the title because in the description of *Secret Feminist Agenda*, I talk about the mundane forms that feminism takes. And I know when I, when I came up with that description, I was thinking about the way that, that feminism is both radical and every day at the same time, that it's simultaneously world making and world transforming, and also, incredibly mundane and incredibly banal, worked into the texture of our lives. And that, that, that mundanity that everydayness of feminism speaks to all kinds of things, including the way that the lived experience of oppression is often built up through daily microaggressions rather than singular remarkable instances of violence, as well as to the way that, that power exerts itself on the most simple, seemingly unremarkable aspects of our lives. You know, the decision whether or not to shave your legs while you're in the shower in the morning. You know, these small embodied, lived practices and experiences that end up making up the larger fabric of what it means to live a feminist life. To quote Ahmed again, forever. So Greg takes us through a lot of the ways that the anecdote works as a form of feminist

intervention into critical theory. In particular the way that Critical Theory is often, sort of, universalizing. It offers these huge overarching ideas, whereas feminist knowledge often seeks to put bodies, and affect, and lived experience back into theory. It works against that, the notion of this detached critical perspective that stands outside its object of study and insists that, that we who are doing cultural theory always need to be inside of it. We always need to place ourselves back inside. And along the way we need to ask ourselves both who we're speaking to and who we think we're speaking for. Right? Where am I coming from? Who am I talking to? Those are, those are central questions of feminist work. And the way that the anecdote is a kind of storytelling mode, it invites us to think, "okay, you know, who am I speaking for?" I'm speaking for me. I'm speaking from this position out of this body, out of this lived experience. "Who am I speaking to? Who, who am I trying to tell a story to? What needs to be explained, what, what can be taken for granted?" That's all about thinking about audience. Greg at one point describes anecdotes as, and this is a direct quote, "a discursive space in which a singular idea can be positioned, offered and demonstrated," end quote. And I think those verbs are so key. There's, there's a huge amount happening in that sentence, but really those verbs "positioned," "offered," "demonstrated," right? That you, you hold out an idea, you place it in context, right? You position it in a particular context, you offer it to someone. So it's not just for you, it's for an audience and then you demonstrate it, you unpack it, you, you mobilize it, you put it to work in some way. And all of this really strikes me as a kind of generosity of knowledge production as a, as a kind of way of thinking that is so much both about you know, putting myself back into the work, but also about bringing other people into the work about saying, "here's how I relate to these ideas. Now tell me how you relate to them. Tell me what does or doesn't make sense to you. Tell me what you see that I don't see." And maybe as we exchange these stories and listen and unpack them, you know, something more than the sum of our individual rooted knowledges will emerge.

Hannah (Host):

[15:24](#)

So in the same article, Melissa Greg is pretty extensively quoting another really important article by Megan Morris. And she quotes this particular passage from Morris that I want to read to you now. Which is about what we do, the work that we do as cultural critics. So Morris writes quote, "we work primarily as mediators, we are writers, readers, image producers, teachers in a socially as well as theoretically obscure zone of values, opinion, belief, ideology and emotion. This is slow work and whatever political effectivity we might claim for it can only be

registered most of the time by gradual shifts in what people take to be unthinkable and doable, desirable and livable, acceptable and unbearable in their particular historical circumstances," end quote. And that's from a Megan Morris Essay called "Great Moments in Social Climbing: King Kong and the Human Fly." That struck me so intensely. That idea of cultural work being a "theoretically obscure zone of values, opinions, beliefs, ideologies and emotions," right? The the way that, that so often when we're talking about these hugely significant cultural and political questions of gender, of sexuality, of identity that have really specific ramifications around questions like immigration, and abortion rights and, and transphobia, medical transphobia, that these are places where disembodied, universalized theories often, often don't work. Because if I have a deeply held ideology and you have the opposite deeply held ideology, we're not going to get anywhere just shouting our opposing beliefs at each other. Our frames of reference are going to be so different that we'll just find no common ground. But anecdote opens up this possibility for these gradual shifts by making things that might start as unthinkable become thinkable, by making things that might start as unlivable become livable. And on the other hand, by making things that might start as seeming bearable become unbearable. And they do that through their capacity to, to open out possibilities and to show how those possibilities might shift the way that we think about these, these seemingly theoretical ideas about power, and bodies, and identities. So I want to end here by pointing towards the incredibly important work that queer women, trans women, and women of color have been doing around, I mean exactly this, around shifting our imaginations to make the world more livable. And where I see a lot of that work happening is in what's often derided or sneered at as the confessional or first person essay, or confessional or first-person lyric poetry. Genres of writing that are dismissed as naive, or simplistic, or straight, forward, or as narcissistic and not relevant to larger cultural conversations. And that and that dismissal is a political dismissal. It's one that says, you know, "I don't want you to shift the frames of reference. I don't want you to open up new space. I want to continue to deride your perspective as less valuable," and these kinds of essays and poems refuse that dismissal and insist on the value in significance of the specific embedded experiences. I'm thinking of the work of Gwen Benaway. Tressie McMillan Cottom, Samantha Irby, Erin Wunker, Alicia Elliot, Sarah Ahmed, Briallen Hopper, Roxane Gay, Jia Tolentino. I meant like I could go on and on. There's so much incredible work, and what for me it has in common is the way that feminist knowledge is built out of lived and embodied experience. Not incidentally, it's not a

coincidence, this is structural to how feminist knowledge works. It's a point of resistance, the sorts of theoretical framings that don't just dehumanize us, but that have often killed us. And I'm thinking so much right now about the rise of restrictive abortion laws in the U.S., in Canada, globally and the way that those laws, which are based on theoretical arguments about the limits of the human and at what point life begins, use those theoretical arguments as an excuse to literally kill women and everybody who can become pregnant. That's not a coincidence. That's what theoretical or ideal thinking abstracted from lived experience does. And it does it on purpose, which to bring it all back is why I think the anecdote has the capacity to do radical knowledge work. Speaking of radical knowledge work. Oh such a good segue. Let's hear from Kaarina. [Music: "I Will" by Mitski]

Kaarina:

[21:06](#)

Hello and welcome to Kaarina's Cozy Self Care Corner. Today I'm thinking about conference self care. So we're going into conference season. Some of you are already in the midst of it. And conferences as wonderful and exciting and inspiring as they can be can also be incredibly difficult physically, emotionally, intellectually, financially, etc., etc, etc. I would love to hear from listeners about your conference self care tips, but here are some of my strategies for maintaining my energy and self during conferences. Number one: skipping panels. You can't attend everything and be actively engaged. It's just, I mean, maybe somebody can, and that's its own superpower, and I'm sure a Marvel movie is coming out right now, especially if that person is a man. But it's just sometimes you know that you could be sitting in an audience and totally disengaged, or you could be elsewhere exploring, relaxing, preparing, whatever you need to do. Get enough sleep. You don't need to socialize every night. You don't need to make every early morning panel. Just let yourself rest. Snacks. Sometimes I will arrive in a city for a conference and immediately buy a box of granola bars and toss them in my bag because sometimes food does not happen when it needs to. Whether it's that the schedule is not arranged to make eating on time possible, or you're waiting for a huge group of people to pick a restaurant. You've got to have a snack on hand, especially if you have dietary needs and, conferences aren't always gonna meet those, unfortunately. Here is one that I'm going to be trying this year. Don't drink all of the coffee. Sometimes I tried to drown my anxiety in coffee and holy poop, is that not effective at all. So this year I'm going to be taking a leaf from Hannah McGregor's book and trying to drink water instead. And finally, take time for yourself. Just because you've traveled this far to see people and meet people and network, whatever that means to you, doesn't mean you need to spend every possible minute doing this. You can take time to just lie in

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your dorm room, watching *Broad City*, or to go and take a walk on your own and explore. It's totally fine. You need to maintain your social energy and you are the only person who knows what your limits are. So tweet me with your conference self care strategies and I'll probably see you in a panel soon. Have a great weekend. [Music: "I Will" by Mitski].

Hannah (Host):

[24:09](#)

I have an important announcement. In beautiful modeling of what self care can look like, Kaarina has let me know that she needs to take a break moving forward from making the Self Care Corner. So unless plans change, she's not going to be coming back with us in the fourth season. So I want to take a moment here just to say how incredibly grateful I am for everything that Kaarina has contributed to this project, for the generosity of the way that she has been thinking alongside us, and all of the richness and creativity and kindness that she has added to *Secret Feminist Agenda*. As you know, you can follow Kaarina @kaarinasaurus on Twitter, so why don't you go tweet at her and tell her how great she is and how great her Self Care Corner has been. As always, you can find show notes and the rest of the episodes of *Secret Feminist Agenda* on [secretfeministagenda.com](http://secretfeministagenda.com) and you can follow me on Twitter @hkpmcgregor. Of course, tweet about the podcast using the hashtag #secretfeministagenda so that I can find your tweets and like them. And whatever country you live in, go sign onto Apple Podcasts and rate and review the show. It is the best way for new people to find it, better even than Twitter. Can you imagine? We have four new reviews this week from Aardvark, Mandy Lynn Katrin, C. Lu Carson and Zeff Blair. I probably mispronounced all of those. I feel pretty confident about Blair. But thank you all so much. 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. Kaarina's theme song is "I Will" by Mitski. *Secret Feminist Agenda* is recorded on the traditional and unceded territory of the Musqueam, Squamish, and 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]