

Episode 4.10 Our Categories of Knowledge Suck with Tina Sikka

DECEMBER 20, 2019

Hannah McGregor: [00:10](#)

Hi, I'm Hannah McGregor and this is Secret Feminist Agenda and welcome to the final Secret Feminist Agenda episode of the decade. Can you believe it? I know it's so arbitrary, these temporal divisions and yet 2020 seems hilariously futuristic to me. Nevertheless, that is when I'm going to see you next, and by see you I mean record my voice via this microphone and then put it on the internet for you to listen to. There's going to be a slightly longer than usual break before the next episode. The next minisode is going to come out on January 10th, that's a week later than the actual fortnightly schedule would dictate. But you know what? I'm trying really hard to take time off over the holidays. I'm trying to actually take a decisive two week break. It's kind of TBD whether that's going to be a successful goal on my part, but let's just call it my 2020 new year's resolution. So whether it's successful or not, we'll have all that resolution nonsense over and done with by three days into the year. I hope everybody within the sound of my voice has cozy and relaxing and minimally stress inducing plans for the next couple of weeks. It is so dark in the Northern hemisphere right now and all I want to do is curl up on the couch with my cats and watch movies and listen to podcasts and just be cozy and quiet and I hope there's lots of coziness and quiet in store for you as well.

One more note before we jump into the episode, I want to give you a bit of a content warning. In this episode we talk about eating disorders, fatphobia, racism, climate change, we touch on sexual violence. We don't talk about any of them in any graphic detail but there's some heavy topics in this one. Just wanted to give people a heads up. It's not a bleak episode by any means, but we talk about some, some big and difficult stuff, so be warned.

Dr Tina Sikka is a lecturer in media and culture at Newcastle university. Her research interests include the sociology of science and technology, which includes environmental science, nutritional science and health as well as feminist praxis and the study of race. In addition to her academic work, Tina has written for outlets like Jacobin, Lady Science and Alternet her most recent book is called Climate Technology, Gender, and Justice: The Standpoint of the Vulnerable.

Hannah McGregor:

But we are not here to talk about adult relationships with parents. As much as at the holidays that's all I ever want to talk about.

Tina Sikka: [03:36](#)

Of course. Yeah.

Hannah McGregor: [03:39](#) What's your relationship with your parents? Like, they'll never listen to this. So just tell me all of the dark secrets. No, we're here to talk about your work.

Tina Sikka: [03:46](#) Yeah!

Hannah McGregor: [03:46](#) Yeah. We're not going to let anything else personal come into the conversation.

Tina Sikka: [03:51](#) Absolutely not.

Hannah McGregor: [03:52](#) Absolutely not. So you're here from the UK.

Tina Sikka: [03:55](#) Yes!

Hannah McGregor: [03:55](#) Where you are a faculty member in what discipline?

Tina Sikka: [03:59](#) In media, culture and heritage.

Hannah McGregor: [04:01](#) Great! What is that?

Tina Sikka: [04:02](#) Yes. So it was a merging. It was a merging that happened a little while ago. It was a separate media and culture under the social science kind of faculty or school. And they recently, I think in the last three years, they merged because they're just finding that there was a lot of cross-fertilization and the heritage is more around museum studies.

Hannah McGregor: [04:25](#) Okay.

Tina Sikka: [04:25](#) Yeah. So it's museum and kind of, we even had like a few people kind of like bridge into archeology a little bit as well. But yeah, media, culture, heritage and we've got journalism in there as well.

Hannah McGregor: [04:39](#) Sounds great actually.

Tina Sikka: [04:40](#) Yeah, yeah. And within the graduate department we kind of have back and forth supervisory experiences and responsibilities. People in fine art and then also people in music. Yeah.

Hannah McGregor: [04:54](#) You supervise people in fine art?

Tina Sikka: [04:55](#) Um, well yeah. I there is something that, you know, if they've got sort of like a gender dimension or something, like I might be a second supervisor or something like that. Yeah. But it's really interdisciplinary. Like it's,

Hannah McGregor: [05:09](#) That's fun.

- Tina Sikka: [05:09](#) Yeah. That's why I think, you know, the range of my different research areas kind of reflects the chaotic way in which the department or faculty itself is just really, yeah, you can sort of pick up on whatever.
- Hannah McGregor: [05:24](#) It's a thing I didn't anticipate about the sort of randomness of where one ends up getting a job because it does feel like in this current academic job market it's a bit random and you're not going to, most of us are not going to end up with jobs in, you know, traditional departments organized around the field that we were trained in. So even if you start off as a particularly disciplined disciplinary scholar, you're very likely to end up somewhere weird and wherever you end up, I mean I was an English scholar, ended up in a publishing studies department. Being here has massively reshaped the trajectory of my research and particularly being in an interdisciplinary field where there aren't the same kinds of concrete understandings of what does and does not count as research because people do such different things, has really given me this wit, this ability to sort of like thread my way through and be like, what if I do this weird thing? What if I do this weird thing? And people are like, yeah, alright. That seems fun.
- Tina Sikka: [06:30](#) Yeah. And I think, I mean my PhD was on Derrida and Habermas. Like it was like, it was like conceptions, like philosophy of communication and you know, political democracy and all this sort of stuff. And then the postdoc was on philosophy of technology.
- Hannah McGregor: [06:46](#) Okay.
- Tina Sikka: [06:47](#) Drawing on them as well. And then one of the philosophy of technology stuff I was doing was on food science and food culture. And it was that that I pitched to the university in the interview. And so it ended up like, they really sort of liked that and the feminist angle to it that I brought in for feminist science studies. And so now, you know, it just totally reshaped my research and I never did interviews, fieldwork was like not something I did it was more of a, you know...
- Hannah McGregor: [07:19](#) Just read a lot of Derrida and think about it.
- Tina Sikka: [07:20](#) Yeah. And write about it. That's, you know, that was it!
- Hannah McGregor: [07:22](#) And write about it. You know what? That's an important part too.
- Tina Sikka: [07:26](#) And so, I've recently, you know, started doing interviews and I'm gonna, you know, have part of a research project I'm working on to have a creative practice component where I'm working with like an artist.
- Hannah McGregor: [07:38](#) Wonderful.

Tina Sikka: [07:38](#) Who's bringing in sort of a sex worker to react to my research and then help her, you know, create some sort of visual image as part of a conference. And I've never done any creative practice stuff and I've never done fieldwork interviews. But, you know, it just seems like everyone else was doing it, and I was like, well, this is, you know, different.

Hannah McGregor: [08:02](#) Yeah.

Tina Sikka: [08:02](#) And I think that, you know, it actually might be worthwhile. So that totally reshapes your research.

Hannah McGregor: [08:08](#) That is so, you know, being in an apartment where you like have colleagues who are artists and you're like, Oh!

Tina Sikka: [08:15](#) Yeah!

Hannah McGregor: [08:15](#) Art's a thing I could like,

Tina Sikka: [08:17](#) Like the fine arts stuff, I was like oh okay.

Hannah McGregor: [08:19](#) Yeah, yeah. That's so exciting. And so I think a useful reminder of the way that like those narrow disciplinary walls can really keep us from actually figuring out the things that we want to figure out. The first time that I submitted a paper that involved talking to real humans, I got, you know, during the peer review, one of the pieces of feedback I got was like, well, you need to explain the methodology you're using to discuss the content of the interviews. I was like, reading? What are we, what are the methodologies available? And that's when I came across the helpful phrase, discourse analysis, which is just a phrase, we don't, we never talk about discourse analysis in English.

Tina Sikka: [09:01](#) Yeah.

Hannah McGregor: [09:02](#) But it seems to be a phrase for reading what's there and then talking about it.

Tina Sikka: [09:07](#) Absolutely.

Hannah McGregor: [09:08](#) And I was like, great. Love that, have a phrase now.

Tina Sikka: [09:09](#) I'm putting up a loose frame around it, might do a little categorization, like this theme came up.

Hannah McGregor: [09:16](#) Yeah. Finding a theme. Funny. A theme is discourse analysis. I'm really used to talking about my methodologies theoretically, talking about, you know, okay, I'm doing like a feminist analysis of this or a critical race analysis, historical materialist analysis of this. So it's those larger conceptual ways that you frame understandings of

your objective study, the scholars that you're going to draw on, the traditions you're going to engage with. But those like those method questions, right? Like what are you actually going to do? Are questions I'm only starting to have to grapple with now that I am like messing with disciplinary boundaries.

- Tina Sikka: [09:54](#) And I think, like I've got grad students who do that too. I always use the term, 'the mechanics.'
- Hannah McGregor: [09:57](#) The mechanics.
- Tina Sikka: [10:00](#) Yeah, because then it sort of gets them in that mindset of like, Oh, I have to show them exactly the steps that I'm sort of using where it's less of a kind of theoretical discussion, but it's more of like, what are the mechanics of actually getting the data together? How you're going to categorize it on what studies is it based, that kind of stuff.
- Hannah McGregor: [10:19](#) I love that.
- Tina Sikka: [10:19](#) Yeah. Yeah. That seems to have been sort of helpful in doing that.
- Hannah McGregor: [10:24](#) Yeah. Great. What a great phrase. So let's jump back to your shift from reading Derrida professionally to feminist science studies.
- Tina Sikka: [10:35](#) Yes.
- Hannah McGregor: [10:36](#) What is feminist science studies?
- Tina Sikka: [10:37](#) So feminist science studies is an approach to scientific work. It's kind of a critical perspective that looks at contemporary science from the lens of feminism to say that there are multiple ways in which science is gendered, in which science has certain assumptions that, you know, can be patriarchal, they can be based on very racist assumptions and it tries to get to a critique and kind of a transformation of the scientific method along feminist lines. So, you know, things like making methods more heterogenous, of talking about objectives that you want things to be empowering or you want things, you know, you want science to attack inequality, that this is something that is important and that that science is not objective, that it contains all these values and assumptions behind it. And that it sort of goes into standpoint theory a little bit, but a lot of feminist science studies, one of its principles is still empiricism, so like having a scientific rigor, but you know, looking at power relations critically and all these sort of other principles.
- Hannah McGregor: [11:56](#) So let's unpack just that sort of standpoint theory piece a bit, cause I don't think I've ever actually talked about standpoint theory on this podcast. My understanding of standpoint theory is that it is largely that sort of feminist understanding of knowledge as being situated. And the necessity of recognizing the situatedness

subjectivity and specificity of, you know, the scholar who is actually doing the work, which is a feminist intervention into the understanding of knowledge as objective, detached from the perspective of the person who is creating it. You know, singular overarching truths that can just be discovered.

Tina Sikka: [12:40](#) Exactly. And that's what it is exactly. One thing that I really like about a feminist standpoint theory is that the majority of feminist standpoint, scholars like Sandra Harding and Donna Haraway, they're not essentialist. So one of the things that they do is, and Helen Longino who I draw on most.

Hannah McGregor: [13:00](#) Helen Longino?

Tina Sikka: [13:00](#) Yeah.

Hannah McGregor: [13:01](#) Great, just clarifying that for when I have to look it up.

Tina Sikka: [13:05](#) She does this thing where she, one of her principles is, you know, having this rigor, this scientific empiricism as well, but she calls it feminist empiricism and she kind of, she has this way, and I think Haraway does as well, of saying that, you know, when we're talking about situated knowledge, we're not talking about women having sort of essential essence that is universal amongst them all. But it's by history, by context, there are certain experiences that women have in common because of the social structures at work, the way things are organized. And that that experience of oppression and dispossession and just sort of general roles that they've had to take on have given them a particularly interesting standpoint from which to analyze things that other people would not, you know, ask certain questions, you know, think about different models have different priorities, but that it's not because we are women, you know, women, it's because of the way that woman has been socially constructed.

Hannah McGregor: [14:11](#) Yeah. What a helpful distinction too because I do think that there is a rootedness of how we talk about feminist knowledge that tends to often, often I think for young feminists unthinkingly without knowing the history, reverts back to this essentialist model of that is based on a desire to talk about embodiment and lived experience and what it means to be in the body that you're in. And embodiment I think can lead us on a slippery slope to essentialism a lot of the time, right? That I'm trying to talk about and understand the specificity but also the sharedness of my bodily experience. And is that going to lead me to saying something like, well everybody who has a body like mine has also had this experience or only people who have bodies like mine can understand this experience. It's so tempting particularly because those are often the vocabularies we just have available to us.

Tina Sikka: [15:08](#) Yeah. And, so you do want to, you know, have this way to navigate having a shared experience and being able to engage in political action out of that. And then also of saying that, you know, there is a sort of sense of embodied singularity as well that, you know, is important also, but that it is not this sort of biological centralism which is, you know, why my approach to science studies has been like critical race studies around science or feminist science studies. They just seem to really, you know, get together really, really nicely.

Hannah McGregor: [15:43](#) Yeah. Is it Spivak the one who came up with the idea of strategic essentialism?

Tina Sikka: [15:47](#) Yes.

Hannah McGregor: [15:48](#) Which I always really liked cause she was basically like, okay, let's all agree that woman is a made up category. The way in which it is made up is being used to crush a lot of us. So let's pretend it's real for the sake of working together.

Tina Sikka: [16:02](#) Yeah. Yeah. And I think that that is the, you know, goal is that there are shared experiences but they're not biologically rooted shared experiences.

Hannah McGregor: [16:12](#) Which is also, I think, a useful distinction and way of remembering, I mean race as a set of constructs. Which a lot of this links back to the enlightenment, the invention of objectivity, the invention of race go hand in hand. So that objectivity can be attached to whiteness as a whatever, as a unique capacity of the white mind and to understand simultaneously that there is no like biological, they're there for race, but that that does not make it not real. Is, I think, a really crucial understanding that resist the sort of essentializing while not saying, Oh, well, just because something's not rooted in biology and the way that we have been told doesn't mean it's not real.

Tina Sikka: [17:00](#) Yeah. That idea that, you know, it's socially constructed, but it has material consequences. Yeah. I'm right now trying to wrap my head around, I've been doing some work around different kind of health trends, that encompass race.

Hannah McGregor: [17:16](#) Oh interesting.

Tina Sikka: [17:17](#) Yeah, so looking at, you know, science through that lens and the idea that there's no biological kind of basis for races. So wrote a couple of articles, sort of popular ones. One I did for Jacobin, which looked at critical race studies. And I talked about how genetic testing and this kind of raced approach to science is reifying and reinscribing race. So, you know, when you have genetic testing kits that, you know, talk about geography, geographies are proxies for race a lot of the time. And so that, you know, is modern genetic science reinscribing race. And so there's things too like this sort of

stream of personalizing diets, which is sort of genetically faulty. Like there's no basis for this stuff, but a lot of them have certain raced assumptions within them. And then there's also race specific medicines. Like there was one for a heart condition that, you know, they basically advertised as for black people. And it turned out that it was really just a way to recategorize the medicine so they could extend the IP on it. But, you know, it didn't look at the fact like, okay, if there are a large number of people who have been racialized that are having a certain condition, what are the conditions that have led to it? So like looking at, you know, where do they live? Is it a lot of pollution? Are they under a lot of stress? You know, like all of these kinds of correlations where it's like it's a chicken and the egg kind of thing. It's like it's because that they're put under these conditions that this particular ailment has come up. It's not because they are black. So I'm sort of saying that all the discourse around science in that area are kind of reinscribing gender and they're reinscribing race as well. I think for around diets, that is just, I hate, yeah.

Hannah McGregor: [19:18](#)

So this is making me think, we talked a little bit off-mic about Jia Tolentino's new book and her essay about optimization, does make me think about that, about these fantasies of a future of diet where it is based on a perfectly curated, exactly right diet for you as an individual. Which also brings us back to that conversation about why I don't go home for the holidays, which is that my stepmother is a huge advocate for diets and it has become a very complex environment for me to be in since the sort of moment in my life where I made the decision to not diet anymore. But that I think is an uncomfortable fact for my family, so they are currently very into keto and intermittent fasting. That's their big thing. And when I try to express that I am uncomfortable with the way that they talk about dieting and weight loss, their sort of response, which I think is the popular liberal response right now is like, Oh of course, no one diet works for everybody, everybody is different. And my stepmom has explicitly said, you know, in an ideal future when we really perfect nutritional science, we'll be able to like do blood work and know exactly what each person should be eating. I was like, what a eugenicist nightmare you are painting right now. Like do you not see that this is fun-hobby eugenics?

Tina Sikka: [20:46](#)

It is!

Hannah McGregor: [20:46](#)

The perfectability of the human via biological testing? Like it's horrifying to me. And so it makes, as one might imagine, makes the holidays a bit of a bummer.

Tina Sikka: [20:58](#)

Yeah. And I think, I've been finding that that is such a story that is recurrent in almost anyone I talk to, anyone identified female I talk to, I've had the same sort of thing I suffered from sort of eating disorders in my teens. It's very much based on this like pressure, you know, this general kind of sense of body perfectibility and ideal

and you have to, and then it's always encased in this like very kind of health like, Oh it's, it's for your health. And you know, when you get down to the actual science and all of the assumptions around it, like you cannot tell a person's health from the way they look, like that is just it, like bottom line. And, you know, you can have someone who fits sort of normative body measurements and can be very ill an, telling people they look good cause they look thinner when you know, Oh I had the stomach flu for six weeks.

Hannah McGregor: [21:57](#)

Cool thanks, I have cancer.

Tina Sikka: [21:57](#)

Yeah! Yeah! It's is something that I'm trying to pull out race and gender out of that as well because black bodies as being particularly looked at as out of control and unruly and how this is trying to rein that in. So looking at kind of the politics of sex around that also. And I think the neoliberal post-feminist kind of discourse around bodies, but I'm trying to connect it to the science and say, you know, the science is kind of reinscribing race and gender in ways that we're trying to get away from. And then the thing is that for race particularly it's done in a way that it's hard to argue with because the argument is that, you know, we are bringing the black population into the scientific discourse, right? So we're catering to a neglected marginalized population. And then you want to sort of say like, no, that's not what you're doing. Like you're, one, trying to use them to get profit, but you are having this effect of reinscribing race.

Hannah McGregor: [23:09](#)

Yeah. It's so tricky when you're thinking about the way in which populations have been systemically neglected and that we see playing out in things like, for example, the sort of super heightened risk to black people who are pregnant and giving birth. And that's obviously a point of intervention in the way that medicine is being practiced. That there are people who are being mistreated within the medical system, right? So recognizing that or to talk about women in the way that various sort of diseases and illnesses that disproportionately impact women are the ones that tend to be the most understudied, the most undertreated, the most ignored. And yet at the same time, there is almost as this like inevitable partnering with like, Oh well we need to treat this thing more thoroughly. This sort of extension of the oppressive mandate of wellness. This kind of like, in a perfect world, all bodies would be healed. And it's like, I don't want to say in a perfect world, people are sick, but making the sort of ideal utopian medical future one in which everybody is perfected is still sinister to me. And we see that a lot in Dawn Serra recommended a Mia Mingus short story, which is about this sort of utopian future in which all disabled people are just sent to another planet. And that's how you create this perfect society. But the story is about what this actual planet, where everybody is disabled looks like and the sort of society that they build collectively. And that sort of utopian possibility of a disabled future. And it's like, okay, like there's something there that needs to

be put into the conversation about who is being ignored in healthcare, what does it look like to provide equitable care that is not about hyper medicalizing everyone.

- Tina Sikka: [25:13](#) Yeah, and what is your definition of good health? Right? That's the other thing. The one thing I am trying to grapple with right now for a book that I'm thinking maybe in a couple of years of writing is around BMI and black bodies.
- Hannah McGregor: [25:27](#) Okay.
- Tina Sikka: [25:28](#) So like the criticisms of BMI is you know that it was based on,
- Hannah McGregor: [25:33](#) Well, established.
- Tina Sikka: [25:34](#) Yeah, it's completely made up. It was for real insurance purposes. It's like a kind of shorthand. It doesn't consider, you know, your muscle to, it doesn't tell you much of anything. And one of the criticisms of BMI that I think is really interesting is that it doesn't account for black bodies and the uniqueness of black bodies. But in asserting that you are saying that there is something biologically distinct about black bodies and if we are saying that there is no genetic basis for race, are you then now saying that there is? Because you are saying that there's something biologically distinct about those black bodies. And then like looking at it as well as you've got this sort of really uncomfortable assumptions about black bodies and they're, like I was saying, their unruliness and the sexuality that go back to early anthropology and you know, is it a product of that that we are kind of moving in that direction of somehow in an attempt to be more inclusive we are actually making race a more concrete category. And so the BMI one is, I think it's really interesting because you can get into discussions of like media representations of black women and their bodies and that sort of stereotype of, of like the butt. Right?
- Hannah McGregor: [27:06](#) I mean this has been very much in the news in the past couple of weeks because Lizzo twerked at a sports event, everybody lost their goddamn minds.
- Tina Sikka: [27:15](#) Yes, absolutely. There was a really interesting piece on Lizzo on, I think that Wear Your Voice blog or sort of feminist intersectional media outlet, which sort of talked about the intersection of fatphobia and also of race in the context of Lizzo specifically. But it's like, yeah, you know, it's really fraught because you do want to say like, Oh yeah, it's not inclusive, it doesn't account for latinx and black bodies. But then those are kind of stereotyped bodies and they're ones that are not like there's no genetic basis to say that their bodies are any different. And we don't want to say that because that means we're saying that race is genetic.

- Hannah McGregor: [27:59](#) Which is, amongst other things, not true, right? Which has this oppressive history and has damaging implications and also isn't based in actual science. So it's, you know, the one two punch of being made up and bad.
- Tina Sikka: [28:14](#) Yeah. I always tell my students like, two people who appear white will sometimes have more genetic differences than someone who looks black and white. So like within these like racial categories, you can have more genetic diversity than between them.
- Hannah McGregor: [28:29](#) Yeah. Which also makes sense historically because we can literally watch racial categories getting invented and changed and policed in different ways historically. And that's, in some ways, the most obvious with whiteness because whiteness has been a massively malleable category that people have been admitted into historically.
- Tina Sikka: [28:51](#) The Irish, the Italians.
- Hannah McGregor: [28:53](#) But it's certainly the case around blackness, you know, who is black enough to be categorized as black, the history of the one-drop rule, you know?
- Tina Sikka: [29:03](#) Versus Brazil's model, which is much different. Yeah.
- Hannah McGregor: [29:07](#) And the difference in, for example, North American history between the one-drop rule as it was applied to black people and the inheritance or non-inheritance of status for Indigenous people, which was, you know, blackness is produced as a absolutely static, unchangeable biological reality that is not always legible, but is always biologically present. Whereas Indigeneity is almost instantly loseable, right? That is something that can be taken away and that can be taken away via residential schools, via the Sixties Scoop, via the continuing massive overrepresentation of Indigenous kids in the foster care system, which all have to do with this sort of construct of Indigeneity as something that can be disappeared.
- Tina Sikka: [30:01](#) And I also was reading about how the one-drop rule for black people was really useful in categorizing more and more people at slaves, whereas they wanted to deny status later on to Indigenous groups.
- Hannah McGregor: [30:16](#) Precisely, right? Because you're talking about people who have primarily been forcibly relocated to North America in order to be enslaved or enslaved and then forcibly relocated. And then another community who, or another set of nations who are being strategically and systematically dispossessed of things that were promised in treaties. So there's a very clear political strategy at work in these different sort of inventions of how race is working biologically. I mean the whole idea that Indigeneity is racial is itself an incredibly contested idea because it's nationhood.

Tina Sikka: [30:55](#) I found that a lot of the literature in that area in indigenous studies and sort of race and Indigeneity has been really useful in my work, because the work by Kim Tallbear for example, she does work on genetics and stuff. So it's been useful in sort of understanding the constructiveness of it all.

Hannah McGregor: [31:18](#) There's a really good episode of the now defunct and much missed podcast Another Round.

Tina Sikka: [31:25](#) Okay.

New Speaker: [31:25](#) So it was a BuzzFeed podcast hosted by two black feminists, Heben Nigatu and Tracy Clayton and Tracy did an episode that was a sort of, she collaborated with like I think an NPR producer, and the episode was about her family story that they had Indigenous ancestors and unpacking how common that is as a family story among black Americans. And she does like a, you know, 32andMe, 32andYou?

Tina Sikka: [31:58](#) Yeah, 23andMe.

Hannah McGregor: [31:58](#) 32andYou. No? 23andMe. We're going with 32andYou, that should be the name of the genetic test. Yep, 23andMe test and you know, finds out that that is, there's no biological basis to that, which leads us back to our question of, you know, how we're doing these tests and conflating race and biology. And then also uses the episode as an opportunity to unpack the history of those claims and how widespread they are. And, and actually interviews Kim Tallbear as part of that conversation to talk about kinship and how different a model kinship is than the kind of biological categorization of identity that you get through these genetic tests.

Tina Sikka: [32:43](#) Absolutely. And that is sort of the, yeah, from, I found that her work was really helpful in making that very clear because you're looking at a different model and you can kind of say, okay, it's very much similar to the categorizations that have come out of race as well. And then made me think also about the kinship that is present in raced communities. So it's this idea that wanting to critique and disrupt race and raced categories at the same time as looking at what those affinities and relations have for people who have been raced in terms of creating a sense of community. And one of the things that I've been looking at also in that area is issues of food, like not only nutrition science stuff, but then also different models of food and food justice and looking at black communities in the States and what they're doing around food justice, it's just like extraordinary. So I think finding all those intersections has been really helpful, especially in the department I'm in, cause it's just people are, you know, all over the place. Just like studying different things and you can kind of jump in on different conversations.

Hannah McGregor: [33:56](#) And find those different unexpected intersections. So let's talk a little bit about, you said your most recent project was about geoengineering?

Tina Sikka: [34:07](#) Yes. Yes. That's a little further back, but yes, geoengineering. So it's actually, there's a new article I just got, I spoke to a journalist a while ago who just wrote a piece for Wired, I think it just came up like a few hours ago.

Hannah McGregor: [34:21](#) Awesome.

Tina Sikka: [34:22](#) And I talk about gender and geoengineering, you know, the fact that there's no women in the area. Also that a lot of their models have very kind of masculinist assumptions built into them. So I look, I do a feminist analysis, but geoengineering is basically this very techno-scientific approach to dealing with climate change through these like extraordinary interventions into the Earth's climate. So to say-

Hannah McGregor: [34:50](#) Oh is that what geoengineering is?

Tina Sikka: [34:51](#) Yes, yes. So there's, there's two models, either, you know, sucking carbon out of the atmosphere or finding ways to reflect the sun's rays back. So, you know, there's strange schemes like painting all the roofs white, which, you know, is a sort of more benign one. But the one that I study is solar radiation management, which is trying to mimic the reflective effect of volcanoes. So after volcanic eruptions all of the sulfate particles do a really good job of reflecting sun away. So you get a cooling. So now scientists are like, why don't we just put a bunch of sulfate in the atmosphere?

Hannah McGregor: [35:31](#) Nope.

Tina Sikka: [35:32](#) Yeah.

Hannah McGregor: [35:32](#) Sorry, I don't know any of the science behind it, but I have a very strong instinct of no.

Tina Sikka: [35:37](#) Yeah. And then it will reflect light and then things will be great, but then they've run models around this and done some tests, post-volcanic eruptions, and they found things like, it's going to make oceans more acidic. It's going to screw up the monsoon seasons in the global South so that things are going to be worse for people living in the global South. Whereas things are better for, you know, people who have money and resources and everything else. And so there's a whole host of unforeseen consequences. And, you know, people on board with this are people like Bill Gates and people like Richard Branson. So there's a whole kind of techno-industrial complex around it as well.

- Hannah McGregor: [36:20](#) This is the, I can't remember if this ever made it onto an episode, but a friend of mine, my friend Megan, the first time I showed her Jurassic park, she was like, Oh, this is the Silicon Valley ethos of move fast and break things in action.
- Tina Sikka: [36:35](#) Yes.
- Hannah McGregor: [36:35](#) And that's, it's the same thing, right? It's like, Oh, we don't have time to wait, it's an emergency, just do it now and we'll just figure out what happens. And it's like that, I guess that is a pretty masculinist model.
- Tina Sikka: [36:49](#) It is. Yeah. And I was looking at the models and sort of looking at how they're very monocausal, they're just looking at CO2 and why do we only look at CO2? What about methane?
- Hannah McGregor: [37:00](#) Why do we only look at CO2?
- Tina Sikka: [37:01](#) Yeah. Yeah. It's just, yeah, it just seems to be this more identifiable kind of, you know, we want this kind of simplicity in the science, which the complexity is more of a feminist principle, feminist science studies and things like why are we always measuring things from the industrial revolution? People were actually messing with the climate before that in ways, you know, around agricultural production. What is our baseline for emissions? You know? Who are we looking at when we talk about negative effects? Are we looking at people with multiple intersectional experiences of oppression? You know, how is like a- I did this sort of an article where I did a kind of case study, a narrative case study at the end where I was looking at, okay, if there's going to be a messed up monsoon season because of geoengineering, what would a Indian woman who's 32 with two kids that lives in this particular state, what would their experience be and why is that not built into these models as well? So it's that kind of feminist critique of the model. So I kind of go through all of the models and kind of pull out these really problematic gaps. But yeah, there's more geoengineering things like, you know, dumping, there was actually, up on Haida Gwaii, someone did a rogue test a little while ago, a few years ago, actually.
- Hannah McGregor: [38:33](#) A rogue test?
- Tina Sikka: [38:34](#) Yes, yes. He said that, you know, one of the things that carbon capture kind of approach to climate change has said that if you put iron like iron sort of filaments into the ocean, they will...
- Hannah McGregor: [38:49](#) Kill fish.
- Tina Sikka: [38:52](#) They'll spark algae blooms, which will suck these CO2 and pull it down to the ground. And there's another theory that doing so, ostensibly, was supposed to be, it's supposed to encourage more

salmon runs. And so private sort of geoengineering activist Russ George went to the tribal council there, and said like, Oh, we want to do this to help you with your salmon runs.

- Hannah McGregor: [39:17](#) Okay.
- Tina Sikka: [39:17](#) But he was sort of a big advocate for geoengineering. And so they dumped a bunch of the siren off of Haida Gwaii, and you can't dump, like the Convention of Biological Diversity and Maritime Laws says you can't just go out and dump things in the ocean. And so there was like a big,
- Hannah McGregor: [39:36](#) This just fucking blows my mind. People are just walking around being like, I'm going to do science to this.
- Tina Sikka: [39:42](#) That's what's happening. A rich millionaire who did it, and so now,
- Hannah McGregor: [39:49](#) It was great, and everything's fixed.
- Tina Sikka: [39:57](#) Not at all! Now the tribal council has sort of pulled away from, you know, the support that they gave originally. And I don't want to sort of, you know, say that they were duped or anything necessarily, but it was this kind of using one scientific argument to mask other priorities. And so there were, under Harper, because this was under Harper, I know the Convention of Biological Diversity like passed a resolution. You can't really do anything. There were a few investigations in the RCMP, which didn't really go anywhere, but there are different geoengineering think tank university groups that are kind of looking at doing trials and different models. But the thing is with the trials, like you can't just do a trial because these are global expansive things. So once you test it, you are actually doing it.
- Hannah McGregor: [40:45](#) Yeah, ah dang.
- Tina Sikka: [40:48](#) And so it's this idea like what if someone, a country just decides to do it.
- Hannah McGregor: [40:51](#) And the way in which the ability to do those things is determined by the sort of rights of nations in a way that aligns the fact that we are all actually connected to each other.
- Tina Sikka: [41:02](#) Yeah. And for economic ends most of the time.
- Hannah McGregor: [41:05](#) Yeah. I mean all of this is making me think of environmental racism, which is an important piece of the conversation around climate change, right? The way that conversations about what is considered to be an acceptable level of risk or an acceptable level of warming, for example, are raced conversations.

Tina Sikka: [41:25](#) Absolutely!

Hannah McGregor: [41:25](#) Because it's acceptable for whom and whose quality of life is allowed to deteriorate to what degree. Because we are already seeing massive horrifying impacts of climate change that have disproportionately affected the global South. And so, you know, people in North America for example, are talking about climate change as though it is a thing, a bad thing that is going to happen to us in the future. Not a terrible thing that is happening to people already all over the world. At the same time, I absolutely find myself getting seduced by the promises of science, by that techno-futurist promise of like, well, somebody's going to come up with something that will fix this because it doesn't seem like there's any other promises. Either somebody's gonna come up with something that's going to fix this or we're all fucked. And when those are the options, it's like, okay, despair or techno-futurism?

Tina Sikka: [42:28](#) Yeah, I mean, and there are ways around energy efficiencies and all these other kinds of resiliencies that can be built into the system. But it's sort of like tinkering around the edges a little bit. And so you either...

Hannah McGregor: [42:41](#) Movin' deck furniture on the Titanic?

Tina Sikka: [42:43](#) Yeah, you're either okay, are we going to just sort of say that's it? We have to stop this industry and we have to, you know, stop this and stop this and hand this back and redistribute this, which seems very unlikely. Or you know, have faith in some kind of techno fix or totally despair? And sort of the nicest one to be in is that bubble of a techno fix.

Hannah McGregor: [43:11](#) Well, and particularly because the techno fix mostly allows you to tap out, right? To be like, well, it's not, I'm not going to do it. So somebody else, some *dues ex machina* is going to come along and save us all. And I don't actually have to like grapple with my complicity with any of this. And at the same time that like, okay, versus I take responsibility and like then well what the fuck can I do?

Tina Sikka: [43:37](#) And the thing is very little because most of the worst emissions are coming from massive corporations. Right?

Hannah McGregor: [43:44](#) Exactly. So here I am, you know, vegan.

Tina Sikka: [43:46](#) Yeah.

Hannah McGregor: [43:48](#) Biking to work. And it's like I'm doing it. All right, thanks for coming.

Tina Sikka: [43:51](#) And that brings us back to that kind of like neoliberal individualizing, you know, and companies are doing this where

they're saying like eat this instead of this, or change your consumption in some very minor way. But really, even if you add up millions of people doing it, it's not going to make the same impact as getting five coal plants offline.

- Hannah McGregor: [44:12](#) Yeah. Yeah. God, the fact that we still have coal is just wild.
- Tina Sikka: [44:17](#) Yes.
- Hannah McGregor: [44:17](#) Wild, truly Dickensian.
- Tina Sikka: [44:19](#) Yes. I know they should only use, coal should only be used for bad children in their stockings.
- Hannah McGregor: [44:25](#) One justifiable use of coal.
- Tina Sikka: [44:29](#) I don't have kids, so I can say that.
- Hannah McGregor: [44:31](#) That's very seasonal and whimsical. I like it. So what are we going to do about climate change?
- Tina Sikka: [44:38](#) Yeah.
- Hannah McGregor: [44:39](#) Just like, you know, my job as a feminist is to critique it.
- Tina Sikka: [44:43](#) It really is the only, the only thing that I see is screw the carbon markets, forget all of that. It really is about saying like, okay, we can't have an extractive economic system.
- Hannah McGregor: [44:54](#) Yup.
- Tina Sikka: [44:54](#) That's just it.
- Hannah McGregor: [44:55](#) Yep.
- Tina Sikka: [44:55](#) So we have to just completely change everything around how we live, move, everything, if we want to attack this and make a dent. Yeah. It's not something that seems very likely going forward, especially after what happened in Madrid and the whole cop, you know, climate conference where they basically didn't do anything. Yeah.
- Hannah McGregor: [45:19](#) And the fact that politically, the impact of climate change appears right now to be a reinforcement of borders and a doubling down on ethnonationalism, seems to be where most people are going is not towards a sort of, alright, we really need to like get together and like figure out how to change our systems. It's this incredibly retrograde doubling down on sort of traditionalist understandings of how nations can like, well, we'll build a bunch of walls and we'll just keep the climate out.

Tina Sikka: [45:57](#) Yeah. And it seems like, you know, the politics are aligned against it. The economics are aligned against it. We've got some pushback, you know, socioculturally, but it's very polarized within that where there are people who are like the kids in the climate strikes and all of that. But it just seems like it's people who are going to be impacted that are activists and that are working towards those ends. And it is the people in power, who wield a lot of power, who are just like, no, it's not real.

Hannah McGregor: [46:29](#) Well I for one, can't wait for the revolution, when eat all the billionaires and shut down the coal plants.

Tina Sikka: [46:35](#) Yeah. I have one Christmas sweater, which says all I want for Christmas is to overthrow the patriarchy. I don't do a lot of like, and it has like, you know, bells and yeah.

Hannah McGregor: [46:52](#) Candy canes. Christmas shit.

Tina Sikka: [46:52](#) It's done in this very sort of Christmasy, font and yeah. So that's my like Christmas wish.

Hannah McGregor: [47:01](#) My only Christmas wish. Yeah. Ah, that would be good. It would be a really good start. It would really just sort of move us forward in the right direction.

Tina Sikka: [47:10](#) I think so.

Hannah McGregor: [47:11](#) Alright, let's keep working on it. Alright. So that was all, that was geoen지니어ing was a starting point in feminist science for you and you moved from there into food.

Tina Sikka: [47:20](#) Yes.

Hannah McGregor: [47:21](#) And from food into health.

Tina Sikka: [47:23](#) Yeah.

Hannah McGregor: [47:23](#) And now you're moving from health into...

Tina Sikka: [47:25](#) Sex and consent.

Hannah McGregor: [47:25](#) Sex and consent and the carceral system.

Tina Sikka: [47:31](#) Yes!

Hannah McGregor: [47:31](#) How did that, like?

Tina Sikka: [47:32](#) It was the consent thing. I was looking at intergenerational justice and climate change. So like consent, like the ability of younger generations to consent to, you know, climate action, whether it's

geoengineering or not. Consent around food was around like the genetics and the, you know, consenting to, even by someone else in your family doing a 23andMe of being, you know, part of that system now. So there's that issue of consent. And then I was really interested in the whole hashtag MeToo, kind of social media movement and consent, you know, in that arena. And so then I started to really read about consent within the context of MeToo, and you know, the property relations underlying it at different models of consent and why it was that a lot of the feminist action was going towards a really sort of carceral model of justice and the problems inherent in that.

- Hannah McGregor: [48:29](#) Yeah. Can you unpack a little bit what the carceral model of justice is?
- Tina Sikka: [48:33](#) Yeah. So I think a really important feminist principle is not a punitive model of justice where we're looking at restorative justice, recuperative justice. We're looking at, you know, trying to amend and kind of help fix broken social relations. And that putting people in jail is just not, prison abolition is a very feminist track. And so I was looking at MeToo as being a very, you know, uncomfortably carceral movement and one that kind of moves into an area of sex negativity sometimes that can be very harmful also. So I started to look at models of consent and sexual relations that were about autonomy or communication or historically were queer sexual relations, which looked at power as very important and kind of navigating that and just saying that, you know, the justice system is not working. Can we look for restorative justice models? How can we keep an approach to consent or an approach to sexual relations that is transgressive and progressive that also encapsulates a model of justice that's restorative. So like the book that I'm working on is trying to have those, all three of those together.
- Hannah McGregor: [49:59](#) I haven't talked a ton on this podcast yet about consent, but it did come up in my conversation with Dawn Serra, when we were talking about this sort of privileging of the consent model in conversations about rape culture and how much it assumes about all kinds of things, including the sort of perfectly transparent understanding of one's own desires, that there's this sort of expectation of a consent based model which, which assumes a lot of other things to start.
- Tina Sikka: [50:32](#) And it also assumes one person asking, one person giving, and it's always the woman who is, you know, the one in the,
- Hannah McGregor: [50:38](#) The giver or,
- Tina Sikka: [50:39](#) A center.
- Hannah McGregor: [50:40](#) Withholder consent. Yeah.

Tina Sikka: [50:42](#) Yeah. Sexual relations are very tricky. You know, there is risk and danger implied in it. I find a lot of film theory really useful when we're talking about sort of like boundaries and spaces and things that overflow and things that can't be encapsulated by our models of knowledge. And it seems like sexual relations are one of them. And so I'm trying to look at different approaches to think about consent and I don't even want to call it that anymore, sexual autonomy, where we we're talking about sexual justice, you know, is there another way for us to kind of talk about it?

Hannah McGregor: [51:22](#) That's really exciting. It's so just sort of come back to where we started that way that as you follow these interests through a nondisciplinary space, that it really can indicate the degree to which, you know, something like MeToo and geoen지니어ing.

Tina Sikka: [51:40](#) Yeah.

Hannah McGregor: [51:40](#) There are connections there and there are these really crucial threads of conversations about race and gender and justice and science and identity and these things that all connect across these lots and lots of different fields.

Tina Sikka: [51:55](#) Yeah, I think the through line between all of it is that like our categories of knowledge suck. So I'm just going to go through all these different spaces in which they suck the worst and talk about why that's the case.

Hannah McGregor: [52:11](#) I love it. Well, that's a beautiful conclusion. Thank you so much.

Tina Sikka: [52:14](#) Thank you for having me.

Hannah McGregor: [52:15](#) This has been wonderful.

If you want to learn more about Tina's work, you can find tons of links to her writing and to her research website in the show notes as per usual, you can find those at secretfeministagenda.com along with all the rest of the episodes of the podcast. You can follow me on Twitter [@HKPMcGregor](https://twitter.com/HKPMcGregor) and you can tweet about the podcast using the [#secretfeministagenda](https://twitter.com/hashtag/secretfeministagenda). Of course, as per usual, you can review the show and thanks so much to JavierCosmic pardon my French accent is not great, but that username is, so congratulations.

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. Tina's theme song was the geoen지니어ing anthem Cloud Busting by Kate Bush.

This episode was recorded on the traditional and unceded territory of the Musqueam, the Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh First Nations where I'm grateful to live and work.

This has been Secret Feminist Agenda. Pass it on.