

Episode 4.7 Trans Rights Are Human Rights

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Hannah McGregor: [00:00](#)

Hi. I'm Hannah McGregor and this is Secret Feminist Agenda. And let me just start off by saying that the entire month of November is extremely rude and I'm not impressed. Every year November sneaks up on me with how hard it is. It's hard weather-wise, it gets cold, it's often rainy and dark, daylight savings has just happened so it's way darker way earlier. It's hard semester-wise, it's the final part of the semester, all of the grading is piling up, students are exhausted and burnt out. And for me it's also hard emotionally because it's the anniversary of when my mum died, and so I also always feel sad. In addition to that, I seem to constantly over-commit to things in November. I think when I say yes to things in like August, November seems so far away and so doable and then November gets here and I'm like, ah, shit. Did it again.

All of which is to say if you're listening to this episode on the day that it comes out, Friday, November 8th, you should come to the Vancouver Podcast Festival happening in Vancouver this weekend. There's two amazing shows tonight. At the Rio. There's The Illusionist and The Secret Life of Canada, both of which I will be introducing. And then tomorrow night there's another two amazing shows, Redman Laughing hosted by Ryan McMahan and then Dark Poutine. And there is masterclasses during the day and there's a PodFair happening Friday afternoon with a Secret Feminist Agenda meetup at 3:00 PM, and buttons and stickers for sale and you should definitely come to it. Come say hi to me. I am so tired. I promise that will be the very fun energy I will bring into any interactions that I have with people this weekend. Hey, lovely to meet you, I'm so tired.

Anyway, it's boring to talk about how tired I am. So instead I'm going to tell you a story. This episode about a thing that made me really tired and also sad. Are you ready? Yeah. You're ready. I want to talk this episode about, I mean for lack of better word, I guess activism, though the language of activism always makes me feel a little like I'm claiming an identity that doesn't quite fit, but I want to talk about what's involved in standing up to injustice when you see it. I mean essentially that's feminism, right? The insistence when you see injustice that you speak up and something about it. I mean that's my feminism for sure. And I want to think a little bit about the complexities of what that can look like sometimes, particularly when you are doing that work in solidarity or allyship. And I want to think a little bit about the limitations as well in terms of what we can do. So my thinking around this topic really comes from the organizing that I did during the month of October around trying to get an event that had been scheduled to happen here at SFU, canceled. The event, was part of a series of quote unquote 'gender identity debates' that are being organized around the country right now. At least there's, there's some organized in

Vancouver and then there was also one organized in Toronto. The Toronto one got quite a lot of press, it was organized at a branch of the Toronto Public Library and a huge amount of really remarkable activism went into trying to get that event canceled as well. So let me give the context. These gender identity debates are being organized and hosted by Megan Murphy who is quite well known for being a self identified feminist who is working really hard to spread the idea that trans women are not women and that trans women should not have the rights that women have. For example, the right to access to women's spaces, to shelters that are for women to use women's bathrooms. She has been fighting very hard for this. She testified against bill C16 which protects gender identity under the human rights code. She is what is generally known as a TERF that's a trans exclusive radical feminist. That is to say that her understanding of feminism hinges on spreading transphobia and excluding trans women.

That, just to make it very clear, is hateful bullshit, as far as I am concerned. The gender identity debates hinge on the idea that we should be publicly debating the legitimacy or reality of trans women's identities. And the very basic line that a lot of folks are trying to draw is that you do not debate people's identities. That debate over the validity of a whole group of people, over the human rights of a whole group of people, promotes hate and discrimination against those groups of people. So organizers in Toronto or on the Toronto public library event and organizers here in Vancouver around the event at SFU worked quite hard to get these events canceled, based again on the argument that events where the premise is debating the legitimacy and human rights of categories of people are extremely dangerous. And because they promote hate and they promote violence against vulnerable populations, they should not fall under the category of free speech.

In Canada, we have very clear limitations around free speech. The event in Toronto was not successfully canceled. Essentially Vickery Bowles, the city librarian in Toronto, doubled down really hard on believing that the event should happen using language that has led a number of people to believe that she might have implied support of the event, in fact, given how she used the language of marginalization to describe the organizers of the event rather than the people who were protesting the event – which is fucking wild because when you are talking about transphobia, transphobic says people are not the vulnerable or marginalized group, obviously. So the event was not canceled. There was an absolutely remarkable protest that was organized by Gwen Benaway and Niko Stratis, who are both trans artists and activists and who did some really incredibly hard work organizing around protesting that event. And we're all just going to have to keep our eye on, moving forward, what happens there in regards to the relationship with the Toronto Public Library that the LGBTQ+ community has, a lot of authors are canceling their events there now and are refusing to support the library. There are necessary conversations happening around

whether boycotting works as a strategy when you're dealing with public institutions like libraries because boycotting is usually for businesses where you can deprive money and there's a question of whether boycotting works on libraries. There's really important conversations happening within the librarianship community on trying to further necessary conversations about how libraries can not be perceived as neutral spaces and that libraries need to take a stand against these really dangerous forms of hate.

Meanwhile, here in Vancouver, a comparable event was being organized at SFU, and I was working with a number of colleagues here to try again to get the event canceled. And the event was moved, the event did not happen at SFU. And the reasons why the event did not happen at SFU are extremely complex and have left me with a lot of questions around how one organizes effectively within an institution. So a library is a really different institutional context than a university is, and the public mission of a library is different in terms of that sense of, you know, needing to serve all of the public. Universities aren't, I mean, we're publicly funded institutions, but we're not public institutions in the same way. And in this case, the event was being sponsored by a faculty member, and that faculty member's desire to support the event, desire to organize the event meant that the event fell really solidly under the category of academic freedom. Academic freedom is the value upon which the whole university is built. Academic freedom says that scholars are allowed to do work that is politically unpopular, that their administrators might hate, that the media might hate, that the government might hate, that people might hate, and that they cannot be reprimanded or punished or stopped from doing that work. And that's really valuable because that makes the university a space that can resist government propaganda, that can resist the status quo, that can push back, that can open new ground.

And in general, it's a very dangerous sign when government is intervening in what academics can say or do. You might recall Steven Harper muzzling climate change scientists in a way that was extremely frightening when it was happening. We always worry when government is saying the academics cannot say particular things and so academic freedom was the argument that was used, you know, when we went to the administration here at SFU and said this event is dangerous, you need to cancel it. The administration said whether we agree with it or not, academic freedom has to be the foremost value of the institution. Which meant that we really had to do some some thinking around the question of academic freedom and whether academic freedom should have limitations.

And there are two ways of thinking about the limitations of academic freedom. One is thinking about expertise, which is to say if I organize an event about how climate change isn't real and also the earth is flat, is that event protected by academic freedom?

Because I'm not an expert in those fields, that's not what my scholarship is about, I don't know anything about that. And in addition to that, the scholarly consensus for experts who do know things about that is that I am wrong. So am I enacting my academic freedom when I organize an event like that or should academic freedom be limited to our actual areas of expertise? The other question, which for me is the more pressing one is, is academic freedom limited by the possibility of what you are saying or doing causing harm? And here with the university we ran into exactly the same problem that organizers in Toronto ran into trying to get that event canceled, which is essentially that there isn't precedent of establishing transphobia as hate speech and because there isn't a legal framework to say that, for example, publicly claiming that trans women are not actually women and should not be allowed to use women's bathrooms or women's shelters, there's no legal framework to say that that is hate speech that encourages violence against a vulnerable category of people. And because there isn't a legal framework for that, institutions like universities and libraries which use legality as their kind of fall back, well they don't include transphobia in their categories of things that they are willing to say can't happen. You know?

So if somebody had organized an explicitly white supremacist event at SFU, maybe SFU would have canceled it. I say maybe I don't have a lot of faith right now that even that would have happened. At the end of the day, as far as I'm concerned, institutions can and should have values. Institutions do have values. SFU talks a lot about wanting to be an engaged university. It talks about not tolerating hate speech internally. It talks about wanting to support queer and trans faculty, staff and students. And if that is the value of the institution, then it is at odds with those values to platform these kinds of events. I don't think having values is at odds with academic freedom. I think an absolutist focus on the freedom to say whatever you want without some level of consideration of the implications is extremely dangerous and extremely scary and is always used to target and victimize already extremely vulnerable people.

Like I said, the event ended up being moved and the reason it was moved was because the faculty member who is sponsoring it withdrew his support given a belief that plans to protest the event might end up posing a risk to the university population. They relocated the event to a very fancy ballroom in an expensive hotel, which is a good reminder that there is a lot of money behind transphobia and that events like this are being organized in places like libraries and universities not because these speakers need access to affordable public spaces, but because they want to use libraries and universities as a way to bolster and legitimize their hateful claims. Again, a reminder of why those of us who are at libraries and universities need to think about what it means for these institutions to have values. I did a lot of work with my colleagues here to try and get this event canceled and the work that

we did had nothing to do with the events eventual relocation. The work that we did got us a letter from the university president that's a two and a half page defence of academic freedom. It got us some valuable moments of solidarity with other academics on campus, a bit of a sense of community. It also got us hateful and cruel emails from community members and ignorant and exhausting emails from colleagues. It did nothing to get the event canceled and it sucked up hours of all of our lives and for a lot of us doing this work, we shared a sense of frustration and exhaustion that in addition to doing all of the other work we have to do, we also have to be spending our time trying to convince our institution not to platform events that are directly harmful to ourselves or to people we love.

And at one point, feeling so much like I was just banging my head against a brick wall of institutional uncaring, I reached out to Lucia friend of the podcast, frequent guest, I mean she's been a guest twice, but that's as frequent as anybody else. Three times she's been a guest three times. Oh, officially frequent guest. I reached out to Lucia and said, what do you do when you just feel so unbelievably exhausted and frustrated by doing work that feels like it's getting you nowhere? You know? What do you do with that sense of impossibility, like nothing I do is going to change the way the world is. And Lucia's reply was characteristically beautiful and thoughtful. She told me about a talk that she had seen Angela Davis give. That talk was about fighting and resisting even when you know you're not actually gonna see anything come of that fight and that resistance in the short term. That you're not going to have the satisfaction of writing that open letter, protesting that event, doing that organizing and actually having the thing work out the way you hoped it would. And she wrote, this is a Twitter thread that I'm going to link to in the show notes, but she wrote, "I'm not spiritual or religious, but to me that articulation of justice yet to come is a declaration of faith, and I am profoundly moved by it." She continued, "I think about something like the underground railroad where those who were escaping, and even those who provided refuge at each step, may not have known it was all going to work out, you know maybe only as far as the next house." And then further down the thread, "in moments when it feels like the work isn't moving the path forward, when it feels like we are being dragged backwards, I know that we can also do the work of leaving breadcrumbs for others to say that we were here, I am here and let what I leave nourish you as you go forward." And I'm really holding onto those incredible words of wisdom right now as we collectively pause and gather our strength and think about what we're going to do next, about how we're going to move forward.

And I know a lot of folks out there are fighting their own fights in whatever part of the world you are fighting in and whatever thing you are focusing your fight on, it's going to be really different for different people and that is great and necessary because we can't all fight all of the fights, but I'm holding on to that that image of

laying down breadcrumbs, of doing the things that feel like they are necessary and urgent and vital and knowing that you're not necessarily going to see results today or tomorrow or next year or in your lifetime and you do it anyway because you have faith that maybe things will change.

If you're anything like me, you are just about ready to crack open your Killjoy Survival Kit. So this episode I want to shout out Steven who sent me a lovely email saying that Witch Please and Secret Feminist Agenda are central to their survival kit and I really appreciate that, knowing that podcast helps folks is honestly the number one reason I do it. Podcasts are definitely a part of my survival kit, but actually right now I really need to give some massive gratitude to the number one thing that has gotten me through October and is getting me through November and is giving me joy and comfort and relief and that is the Great British Bake-off. I was a late-comer to this show, I started watching it for the first time in October, I have watched like five seasons in the past month. I know I am probably preaching to a lot of choir members right now, but this is the most comforting thing I have ever watched. The tent is this beautiful space outside of reality where very gentle and kind people do their best to bake a nice loaf of bread, and the worst thing that ever happens is that your bread's not that great, and then people feel bad for you and give you a hug because your bread didn't turn out great. It's so low stakes. It's so beautiful. Everybody is so kind and so encouraging and it's mostly about eating carbohydrates. I mean it's about preparing carbohydrates, but we all know what happens at the end of that. Honestly, no more comforting form of television could possibly exist and I love it and I'm grateful for it and it has a place of honor in my survival kit. Don't forget, if you want to tell me about what's in your killjoy survival kit to send me an email secretfeministagenda@gmail.com or tweet at me to let me know, and you can find me on Twitter [@HKPMcGregor](https://twitter.com/HKPMcGregor) and you can tweet about the podcast in general using the [#secretfeministagenda](https://twitter.com/secretfeministagenda).

As always, you can find show notes and the rest of the episodes on secretfeministagenda.com and I hope if you haven't already you will consider rating and reviewing the show. We have new reviews this week from OChristmasTree in Canada and nouseernameleftthanks in Germany, which is a hilarious username. Thank you both 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 or follow them on Facebook.

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