

Episode 4.13 Empathy Fatigue & Hopepunk

February 7, 2020

Hannah McGregor: [00:00](#) [Theme Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans] Hi, I'm Hannah McGregor and this is *Secret Feminist Agenda*. And guess what? For those of us in the Northern Hemisphere, we are past the halfway mark between winter solstice and spring equinox, which means we are moving out of the dark and into the light. It can be really hard to remember at this time of year especially depending on where you live. But these cycles, I find, can help to really ground us and mitigate against despair and feelings of overwhelm. And I'm marking this at the beginning of this episode both because we had a *really grim* January in Vancouver and I need this reminder for myself, but also because of my topic for this week. Let's just get straight into it. [Theme Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans]

Hannah McGregor: [01:01](#) I want to talk this week about empathy fatigue and hope. So, recently I was sitting in on a class and listening to some student presentations and one student was talking about exactly this problem, how we mitigate against people getting totally overwhelmed by all the suffering in the world and just turning off. Just, you know, scrolling through Twitter and getting completely numbed by just how much of everything there is. And I was reminded as I am from time to time that this question of how we care about everything and everyone in a world that is full of too much information, too much suffering, too much noise, has been a pretty central question for most of my academic career. I'm sure I've mentioned it before, but I wrote my dissertation about this problem of how we care about suffering that is happening not next to us. What I called, in my dissertation, distant suffering, things that are happening to people we don't personally know or that we're not personally involved in outside of our own communities. And that question of how we care about things that are distant to us I think really matters for those of us who live in countries like Canada, countries where a lot of the worst things that are happening in the world are things that are deliberately happening far away from us because we engineered the world to look like that. Because developed nations like Canada are built on the deliberate engineered suffering of others, including the disproportionate impact of climate change on people in the global South, including the disproportionate impact of things like pipelines on the Indigenous nations whose land they're going through. I mean, you don't see governments pushing pipelines through downtown Vancouver, do you?

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Hannah McGregor: [02:54](#) And so that question of how I care beyond my immediate community is a vital question, especially when the world has been built to mitigate against that, to encourage us to not care about people outside of our immediate communities, and then to heap the disproportionate amount of deliberate, politicized suffering on those exact people. And we're having a lot of really necessary conversations right now via the work of people like Anne Helen Petersen about burnout culture in general, about sort of late capitalist cultures of work and how exploitative they are, and how organizing, unionizing for example, can help to mitigate against that kind of burnout. But there are other kinds of burnout as well, right? This kind of empathy or compassion burnout. This is a phenomenon that has been observed for a long time. I think it was first sort of named as compassion fatigue in the 1950s as a phenomenon that affected nurses. And that's sort of where it started, as being noticed as a kind of secondary traumatic stress that impacted people who bore witness to a lot of trauma even if they weren't sort of experiencing it themselves. So it's a specific kind of burnout that affects people in particular kinds of professions and kinds of caring professions.

Hannah McGregor: [04:15](#) But it's also been identified as a function of contemporary news media, where we are massively over-inundated with human suffering at an unprecedented and constantly accelerating rate in a way that most people agree is just too much for most of us to handle. And in the face of that overwhelm, we can have a tendency towards stasis, to sort of sticking our heads in the sand and ignoring what's going on. I'll never forget overhearing a white graduate student explaining to a professor that she didn't want to take a grad seminar on the history of Black writing in Canada because she was already too depressed. And I was like, dang, that's peak whiteness right there. And it's also a perfect example of how this kind of feeling of overwhelm can be deeply, deeply politicizing. And it strikes me that in the face of this kind of overwhelm, one of the obvious forces that would mitigate against it is hope. Optimism.

Hannah McGregor: [05:21](#) But gosh, those words kind of make my skin crawl. I have this knee jerk resistance to the idea of hope and optimism. It feels, again, dangerously apolitical to me. Like a kind of emotional or affective cover for real, necessary change, that feeling optimistic can be an alternative to actually doing anything, right? The optimism of like, well I believe in the resilience of humanity in the face of overwhelming crisis, so I'm just gonna put faith in that feeling and do nothing to actually mitigate against said crisis. I've also wanted, in the past, to put faith in art and literature and storytelling as forces that can push us

through numbness or burnout or fatigue and make overwhelming things like distant suffering, like climate change, seem real and urgent and personal and actionable. But I've never seen any proof that literature does much more than make us feel better about ourselves. It doesn't necessarily spur action.

Hannah McGregor: [06:35](#)

But there's something in that, in literature making us feel better, that some writers have pointed out recently can itself mitigate against this kind of emotional burnout. And my friend Claire recently sent me an article called "Hopepunk and Solarpunk: On Climate Narratives That Go Beyond the Apocalypse." It's by Alyssa Hull who is a science educator and who is describing in it how her students often seem overwhelmed in the face of the realities of climate change. She writes, "Many of my students hear the words, 'we have 18 months to tackle climate change or it will be too late' and they think that in 18 months they are going to die. Maybe this thought is what inspires them to join the youth climate movements or Extinction Rebellion; or more crucially, maybe this is the thought that paralyzes them, anesthetizes them, and keeps them away and keeps them asleep." End quote. Hull quotes ecofeminist Donna Haraway, telling us that we have to "stay with the trouble" and avoid turning away from unpleasant realities. And that's what she suggests literature can do: that it can help us stay with the trouble. And she points specifically to a genre of speculative fiction known as hopepunk as a genre she's really interested in helping students to, in her case, stay with the trouble of thinking our way through climate change.

Hannah McGregor: [08:06](#)

So hopepunk, for those of you who haven't heard of it, was this term coined I'm pretty sure on Tumblr by Alexandra Rowland and this is her definition in a nutshell. She writes, "Hopepunk says that genuinely and sincerely caring about something, anything, requires bravery and strength. Hopepunk isn't ever about submission or acceptance. It's about standing up and fighting for what you believe in. It's about standing up for other people. It's about demanding a better, kinder world and truly believing that we can get there if we care about each other as hard as we possibly can with every drop of power in our little hearts." End quote. And Hull's point is that speculative fiction that sort of works in this hopepunk genre can remind us that the future is neither a utopia nor a dystopia. It's just another site in which people who want the world to be better have to fight for it, which is always what the world has been and that in the face of things that can feel overwhelming, there still are always going to be people fighting for a better, kinder world. And that fighting, I think, is really key to how we rethink what it means to be optimistic. I was recently rereading the conclusion

to Sara Ahmed's book *Willful Subjects* and in it she talks about optimism and its dangers. And she quotes, you know, any critical theorists out there, when you think about optimism and its dangers, your mind almost immediately would go to Lauren Berlant's idea of cruel optimism, which is basically attachment to something or desire for something that actually undermines our capacity to thrive. So orientation towards a future or towards goals that actually will make us thrive less.

Hannah McGregor: [09:57](#)

Think about how we have a tendency within late capitalism to hope for things like fancy jobs and expensive goods that are actually going to suck us deeper into the sort of grinding gears of capitalism itself so that we are specifically hoping for something that prevents our thriving. So in this conclusion, Ahmed is thinking about Lauren Berlant, about cruel optimism, and she's thinking about this, this phrase that gets used a lot in cultural studies. It's usually attributed to Antonio Gramsci who was an Italian Marxist philosopher in the early 20th century. And that phrase is "optimism of the will, pessimism of the intelligence." And she's trying to think specifically about that "optimism of the will" part and about whether there's something going on there that's maybe a little bit more complex than feeling good, sort of a hopeful attitude, because that kind of hopeful attitude for her is basically cruel optimism. But then she points out that Gramsci was actually explicitly suspicious of optimism and she provides this Gramsci quote. So this is Gramsci quoted in Ahmed. Gramsci writes, "It should be noted that very often optimism is nothing more than a defence of one's laziness, one's irresponsibility, the will to do nothing. It is also a form of fatalism and mechanism. One relies on factors extraneous to one's will and activity, exults them, and appears to burn with sacred enthusiasm. And enthusiasm is nothing more than the external adoration of fetishes. A reaction is necessary, which must have the intelligence for its point of departure. The only justifiable enthusiasm is that which accompanies the intelligent will, intelligent activity, the inventive richness of concrete initiatives which change existing reality." End quote. Now that's a real mouthful and worth spending some time unpacking and probably beyond what I can effectively unpack in an episode like this. But Gramsci is pointing to something similar to what Berlant is pointing to, right? This problem with enthusiasm or optimism as a good on its own, which has a tendency to locate the possibility for change outside of ourselves, to underplay our own role and responsibility in change. So he's emphasizing here an intelligent will, intelligent activity, and concrete initiatives, which is that we have to always be thinking about how to solve problems and how to fight for something better. And turning that thinking

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into concrete initiatives, into actual action, into things we can do to actively bring about the future that we want. And that, I think, is what hopepunk is about or can be about, about what it means for people to be fighting, fighting for the future that they want.

Hannah McGregor: [13:04](#) And if that's hopepunk, then the most hopepunk thing I have been engaging with recently is a podcast called the Sandy & Nora show made by Sandy Hudson and Nora Loreto who are both organizers and who talk about... The podcast is specifically about Canadian politics. But the way that they frame discussions of contemporary political issues is through the lens of activists and organizers, through the lens of the kinds of strategic work that we need to do to change the world. So it's not this sense of here's an overwhelming, numbing kind of view of what's going on in the world, but, you know, here's a problem and here's the kind of organizing that we might do around it. You know there's that pessimism of intellect, that awareness that the world is fucking bleak sometimes. And then alongside it, that optimism of will, which is to say, it's fucking bleak and here are some things we can do.

Hannah McGregor: [14:09](#) I'm teaching a course right now about publishing and social change and we're spending a lot of time looking at and talking about zines. You know, zines are a form of publishing that emerged in large part from the punk movement in the 1960s and '70s and have this really punk rock, DIY, sort of janky aesthetic to them and have this urgent passionate sense that the world is something that we can intervene into, that the world is something we *must* intervene into. And I don't know if hope is a word that, you know, queer, punk zine makers of the 1980s would have used to talk about their radical publishing agendas in the face of the AIDS crisis. But I'm finding the phrase hopepunk a useful way to think through these problems right now. So maybe you will, too. [Theme Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans]

Hannah McGregor: [15:06](#) Speaking of useful things, let's take a look inside our Killjoy Survival Kits. [Sound Effect: Chest Creaking Open]

Hannah McGregor: [15:16](#) I got an email from Miranda this week who says, "I've been thinking about what is in my survival kit and the more I think about it, the more I am certain that at the moment my survival kit is just a big bucket of water. Water to drink to improve my mood and help me function and move through long days, water to swim in, to loosen my tight shoulders and feel the joy of slowing down and controlling my breathing as I swim back and forth. Water to bathe in, to give myself time to be still and quiet

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and with myself. And lastly, I think everyone needs a bucket of water to throw at their local and national politicians.” I love that. I love putting [Laughs] just a big bucket of water in your survival kit. So thank you for that, Miranda. And me? I'm putting another book in there because I love to put books in my survival kit and this week it is going to be Carmen Maria Machado's new memoir *In the Dream House*.

Hannah McGregor: [16:13](#)

We had an unexpected snow day yesterday and I read the entire book in a single afternoon. It was that compulsively readable, that absolutely gorgeous. It's an experimental memoir in which Machado grapples with the possibility of representing trauma, in this case, an abusive relationship, by experimenting with the form of the memoir and what the memoir can be, as well as playing out a sort of representation of trauma and abuse as a haunted house. Hence, the dream house. It is, at times, a really hard book because it is a book about trauma and abuse. It is also stunningly beautiful and absolutely brilliant and one of the most genuinely unique books I have read in a long time. It did the same thing that Machado's writing always does, which is desperately made me want to write more. She's a very writerly writer. So if you've got a snowy afternoon coming up in your future, I recommend it.

Hannah McGregor: [17:19](#)

Don't forget to email me at secretfeministagenda@gmail.com or tweet at me to let me know what's in your survival kit. [Sound Effect: Chest Slamming Shut] That's it for this week. As always, you can find show notes and the rest of the episodes of *Secret Feminist Agenda* on secretfeministagenda.com. You can follow me on Twitter [@hkpmcgregor](https://twitter.com/hkpmcgregor) and you can tweet about the podcast using the hashtag [#secretfeministagenda](https://twitter.com/hashtag/secretfeministagenda). And of course, don't forget to rate and review the show. It's the best way to keep it on people's radars. There are two new reviews this week, one from Westhen?—Or Weston? Hmm—in the US and one from QuakerWitch in Great Britain. Thank you both so much. The podcast's 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 territories 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. [Theme Music: “Mesh Shirt” by Mom Jeans]