

Episode 4.19 Listening

May 1, 2020

Hannah McGregor: [00:00](#) [Theme Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans] Hi, I'm Hannah McGregor and this is *Secret Feminist Agenda*. Hey. [Tired Laugh] How are you doing? Not good? Me neither. I was chatting with somebody this morning about the problem of these kinds of niceties, you know? Asking somebody how they're doing or signing an email and how they all seem so incredibly banal right now, but any actual, appropriate one would be disruptive? I don't know. I'm experimenting right now in emails with signing them off: "I hope you're 'well'" in scare quotes, but then that seems like I don't actually hope you're well and I do hope you're well, I just...think you probably aren't. And frankly, if you are, I'm a little suspicious of you. Anyway. Maybe we should just sign off emails "best wishes" or [Laughs] "good luck" as Cynara suggested today, which is very, which is very bleak and I really enjoy it. You know what? I actually want to talk more about this whole conversation about asking people how they're doing, but it ties into what I want to talk about this week. So...let's do that. [Theme Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans]

Hannah McGregor: [01:31](#) So I was listening to the forthcoming newest episode of the *SpokenWeb Podcast*. The *SpokenWeb Podcast* is a project that I'm involved in. It's part of this larger national project called SpokenWeb, which is looking at audio literary archives. For example, recordings of poetry readings from the '60s and '70s. And the project is interested in doing a whole bunch of things including digitizing these old analog archives and making them more widely searchable and accessible. But as a project, it's also really interested in the question of how we study sound, especially historical sound, and I was invited to join the project to help head up a group of people making a podcast about it, since there's an opportunity here to think about how we can do sound-based scholarship. And there's a new episode—it's a monthly podcast that is about sound and literature and archives—and the new episode is coming out on Monday, May 4th and it's about how our habits of listening are changing in the midst of this pandemic, how we listen differently.

Hannah McGregor: [02:40](#) It's such a smart episode. There's so much interesting stuff going on in there about Zoom calls and teaching online and poetry readings online and the difference between sound and noise and silence. It's super smart and I really love listening to it. And right at the beginning, the two co-producers Jason and Katherine, have this conversation about this weird formality of

asking people how they're doing and how these kinds of old formalities don't seem to fit. I mean, if they ever fit. We can, we can ask the question about whether they were ever any good, but they certainly don't feel any good right now. And they propose at the end of the episode that instead of asking people how they are, you ask people how they're listening since how we're listening is such a good metric of how we're doing. And it got me thinking about how I'm listening, about how I'm also listening differently right now.

Hannah McGregor: [03:50](#)

Some obvious things impacting the way our listening has changed. The rise, for those of us who are still working, in regular Zoom calls is an example, particularly articles on, on Zoom and video call burnout suggest that the requirement on video chatting to perform listening is part of what exhausts us so much because it takes more energy to perform listening than to actually listen. And gosh, if we could all just start doing phone calls instead of video chats or all turn our video off, that would be really, [Laughs] really helpful for me, at least. But I have also been noticing that sound has become, for me, something I really want to control. I have almost no control over my environment. You know, I'm fundamentally stuck in this apartment 23 hours out of the day and I have basically no control over the world outside this apartment. You know, with the exception of the small ways in which I absolutely do. My ability to donate money into my community, my ability to have an impact on the lives and the days of my students and my colleagues. You know, like I still, I still have an impact in the world as do we all. But it feels small in the midst of this crisis. And all of those forms of lack of control have made me want to have something I do control. And for me that's sound.

Hannah McGregor: [05:27](#)

So I've become hyper cognizant of the soundscapes around me on a daily basis. I am noticing everything more, in both good ways and bad ways. I've had to have more conversations with my neighbours upstairs and downstairs about noise, conversations that have been friendly and neighbourly because we are all in this weird experience together, and I've also invested a fair amount of money at this point into noise-canceling headphones, more than one pair, in fact. Some over-ear ones for during the day and some earbuds for at night. I also have a white noise machine on its way to me in the mail. But in addition to that, I've also been noticing a difference in the kind of things I want to listen to. And what I'm noticing is that I am seeking out more immersive, focused, intensive ways of listening.

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Hannah McGregor: [06:28](#) So, for example, since the new Fiona Apple album *Fetch the Bolt Cutters* came out, what? What was that? Time's not real anymore. So, was that a week ago or a month ago? I have absolutely no idea. But I've been listening to that album almost exclusively on repeat, and listening to it with the kind of intensity that I don't know if I've listened to an album since I was a teenager. You know, this kind of ritualistic repeating and repeating and repeating of the songs all the way through. Trying to pay attention to what they're saying and what they're doing, trying to pick things out, trying to understand more about it as I listen through it.

Hannah McGregor: [07:12](#) But I've also been noticing a shift in the kinds of podcasts that are appealing to me right now. The podcasts that used to be my go-tos are, well, a lot of them are sitting unlistened to in my queue while I pull up other stuff that I sort of intended to get to but didn't get around to and take deep dives into it. I still enjoy a sort of casual chatty podcast in the back while I'm making dinner or doing something, but when I'm going on a walk or lying [Laughs] on the floor staring at the ceiling, which happens fairly frequently these days, I want something that invites me to listen closely rather than to listen casually. I want my ears and my brain to feel immersed and occupied. That kind of listening, for me, slows things down and helps to temper both the sort of frantic rapidity of my brain as well as the weird sameness of these days. Because when I'm listening to something closely, not only do I remember it better, but I remember what I was doing when I listened to it. The sounds of it start to associate themselves with particular times and spaces so that the walks that I go on start to differentiate themselves even if it's the same route every day. Because on that day I was listening to that episode and on this day I was listening to this episode.

Hannah McGregor: [09:00](#) And so it's particularly helpful to me if those podcasts, those sort of immersive podcasts, are telling stories. Stories that have a beginning, a middle, and an end. And the podcast that has been, right now, most successfully scratching this very specific itch is a podcast made by the folks behind *Welcome to Night Vale* called *Within the Wires*.

Hannah McGregor: [09:26](#) I heard about *Within the Wires* probably when it first came out. It started in 2016. And it was one of those like, "Oh, that sounds really neat. I'll probably listen to that at some point," subscribe to it, and then it sat untouched in my podcast app for...I guess four years now. [Laughs] And that's because, for the most part, when I listen to podcasts, it's in a half-distracted way and it needs to be okay if I miss a sentence or two here or there because I'm probably doing something else and I'm not going to

pause and rewind every time I stop paying attention. And fiction podcasts often, for me at least, feel like something I need to be paying attention to. And *Within the Wires* in particular is something that feels like I need to be paying attention to.

Hannah McGregor: [10:16](#)

So for those of you who haven't listened, it's a sort of audio epistolary story told in multiple seasons. By audio epistolary... Epistolary is a word referring to a story that takes the form of letters. So a lot of early novels were epistolary novels, so it was a series of letters of a narrative that unfolded across a series of correspondence. And there's a lot of canonical novels that do that. The one that comes to mind right now is *Dracula*? [Laughs] Is made up of a bunch of different kinds of, of found documents. But there's lots and lots of examples. In this case because it's a podcast and they want to play with the possibilities of the audio medium, what they're doing is telling a story through different kinds of existing audio forms. So the first season is relaxation tapes. The second season is a series of audio guides to art exhibits. I haven't listened to the third season yet, so I don't know what it does. There's also a bonus series for Patreon subscribers that's the black box off a flight.

Hannah McGregor: [11:28](#)

And the series isn't just these sort of audio epistolary forms. They're also very specifically meant to evoke the experience of listening to a cassette because the series is set in an alternate history version of the '70s?—'60s, '70s, '80s? There about—a different version of our world in which, in the wake of World War II, there was a massive political transformation that involved the fall of established forms of government and nation states, as well as the demolishing of the family unit as we know it. And in this sort of alternate version of the world, not quite a dystopia because it's not set in the future, but certainly in an alternate history with a dystopian flavour to it, children are taken away from their families when they're young and they're reprogrammed into being the right kinds of citizens before they're let out into this world.

Hannah McGregor: [12:34](#)

And so the stories that you're listening to, these found audio documents, by definition are stories being told in an unfree society. And in both the first and second seasons, the narrators are trying to communicate something, trying to slip a narrative into these documents, a narrative that is not allowed to be told because of the unfree society that they are living in, a narrative that they want to tell. A narrative that on one level, they're telling to you. Because both relaxation tapes and audio guides are narrated in the second person. So they both address you directly and give you instructions, instructions on how to relax your body or instructions on looking at an imagined piece of art.

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- Hannah McGregor: [13:31](#) The really interesting thing though is that the tapes both are and aren't meant for you. In the first season, the intended audience is a very specific person who the creator of the relaxation tapes is trying to reach, trying to get a message to. And you as the listener can, at the same time, imagine yourself as that person who's trying to be reached, who can...can immerse yourself into this narrative so that you're part of it. But you can hold at the same time the truth that you are not the intended listener, that you are an accidental listener. That there is always the possibility with these artifacts that they have gone astray, fallen into the wrong hands. In fact, that the possibility that the artifacts have fallen into the wrong hands is the whole reason they have to be constructed the way they are in the first place. Which is to say that you simultaneously occupy the position of the intended listener and the absolutely unintended listener, the feared listener.
- Hannah McGregor: [14:41](#) The fascinating way that these tapes position you is amplified even further by the fact that both of these seasons, both the first and seasons, are also queer love stories. They are narrated by women and they are addressed to or about other women who are the objects of both their fascination and their desire. So you the listener are simultaneously queered via the address while also being positioned as that which queer desire most fears the unintended listener, the listener who will use their ability to overhear the story as a way to silence.
- Hannah McGregor: [15:29](#) One of the things I find most comforting about podcasts is the sense of intimacy and closeness that they can create between listener and host. This is kind of a truism of podcasting. Glen Weldon has referred to it as a one-sided intimacy, that as you listen, you gradually accumulate all kinds of banal knowledge about the hosts that makes you feel like you know them well. Plus, you're listening to their voices while you're engaged in your own sort of banal day-to-day activities and that, in a different way, can sort of register to you that this is the voice of somebody you're close to because who else's voice do you hear when you're in the bathtub? And I think there's a lot of interesting possibility in that intimacy and that sense of trust. I think it means that podcasts can take us to really interesting places, can challenge us in interesting ways, or help us learn or, or help us meet and to understand people who are different from us.
- Hannah McGregor: [16:31](#) But that intimacy and that sense of trust can also be misused. It is misused. It can be manipulative. And it can be used in manipulative ways. And it's really exciting for me to be listening to a work of art that is thinking about the feeling of intimacy,

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that listening and genders, about the possibility that that intimacy is misplaced, that's thinking about the feeling of trust that we as listeners have towards the hosts of our favourite podcasts and is introducing unreliable narrators and unstable narratives as a way of reminding us that we shouldn't necessarily trust what we're hearing.

Hannah McGregor: [17:20](#) My life feels a lot slower and a lot smaller right now than it has, maybe ever, in my adulthood. And I don't want to talk about silver linings because I think that they're gross and crass in the midst of a global crisis that's killing a lot of people, but I do want to pay attention to what is happening in my own life and how this moment is impacting me and... Well...I think I'm listening differently. [Theme Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans]

Hannah McGregor: [17:52](#) Now before we wrap up, let's take a quick peek into our Killjoy Survival Kits. [Sound Effect: Chest Creaking Open]

Hannah McGregor: [18:06](#) I have a few kits to share this week. Victoria's kit includes practicing tarot, walking their dog, attending online Zoom Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, and baking banana bread and lemon cookies. Suzanne's survival kit includes taking the time every day to write down ten positive things about that day in a little book. Gosh, that sounds really challenging right now, but also potentially very good for your brain. And Kendrick's survival kit has *The Invisible Man*, that recent Elisabeth Moss movie, in it. I'm gonna keep putting *Animal Crossing* in there every gosh darn week, but I'm also going to add *Drag Race* in right now because I've been watching the most recent season and even though it is not great, and RuPaul's obsession with the thinnest, prettiest, whitest queens continuously gets me down, that is still some good, distracting entertainment. And don't forget to email me at secretfeministagenda@gmail.com or tweet at me to share what's in your Killjoy Survival Kit. [Sound Effect: Chest Slamming Shut]

Hannah McGregor: [19:18](#) 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 and you can tweet about the podcast using the hashtag #secretfeministagenda. You can, of course, always rate and review the show, it helps us find new listeners. There's a lovely new review this week from AinslieRose in Australia. 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 territories of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh First Nations where I'm grateful

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to live and work. This has been *Secret Feminist Agenda*. Take care of yourselves and pass it on. [Theme Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans]