

## Episode 4.24 Providing Some Helpful Discomfort with Cicely Belle Blain and Vivek Shraya

September 11, 2020

Hannah McGregor: [00:10](#) [Theme Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans] Hi, I'm Hannah McGregor, and this is *Secret Feminist Agenda* and I'm delighted to be back with you after a much-needed hiatus. During which I had the time to: A, write a second draft of my book, and B, think about where I want this podcast to go. I've got some exciting plans in the works for season five that I'm not quite ready to announce yet, but you're going to notice a new sub theme as I finish out the last six episodes of season four, which is: mentorship. And to start things off on a high note, I turned to my personal favorite example of mentorship, Arsenal Pulp Press' VS Books imprint. You'll find out what that is in a moment, but first let me introduce Vivek and Cicely. Vivek Shraya is an artist whose body of work crosses the boundaries of music, literature, visual art, theater, and film.

Hannah McGregor: [01:01](#) Her bestselling book *I'm Afraid of Men* was heralded by *Vanity Fair* as "cultural rocket fuel". And her album with Queer Songbook Orchestra, *Part-Time Woman*, was nominated for the Polaris music prize. She is also the founder of the publishing imprint VS Books. A six-time Lambda Literary Award finalist, Vivek was a Pride Toronto Grand Marshal and has featured on *The Global and Mail's* Best-Dressed list. She's a director on the board of the Tegan and Sara Foundation and Assistant Professor of creative writing at the University of Calgary and is currently adapting her debut play *How to Fail as a Pop Star* into a television pilot script. With the support of CBC. Cicely Belle Blain is a Black slash mixed queer femme from London, UK. Now living on the lands of the Musqueam, Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh people. Their ancestry is a mix of Gambian, Jamaican, and English. At the heart of all their work, Cicely Belle harnesses, their passion for justice, liberation, and meaningful change via transformative education, always with laughter and fearlessly in the face of systemic oppression. They are noted for

founding Black Lives Matter Vancouver and subsequently being listed as one of Vancouver's 50 Most Powerful People, *BC Business*' '30 Under 30' and one of 150 Black women and nonbinary people making change across Canada. They are now the CEO of Cicely Blain Consulting, a social justice informed diversity and inclusion consulting company with over 200 clients across North America, Europe, Asia, and Africa. Cicely Belle is an instructor in executive leadership at Simon Fraser University and the author of *Burning Sugar*, which just came out with Arsenal Pulp Press this month.

- New Speaker: [02:59](#) [Cicely's Theme Music: "Spirit" by Beyoncé]
- Hannah McGregor: [03:02](#) This is the first *Secret Feminist Agenda* interview that I have done since I took a hiatus shortly after the beginning of the pandemic. And I have realized over the past four months that I've gotten quite bad at talking to humans. So apologies in advance. I mostly talked to cats these days.
- Vivek Shraya: [03:27](#) [Laughs] It's funny you should say that, I was literally at a friend's art opening and somebody asked me some sort of like small talk question, and I literally was like, uhhhhh like just sound came out, but like no words came out. [Laughs] So, yeah, I hear you.
- Hannah McGregor: [03:48](#) Yeah. That's, that's relatable. I got my hair cut for the first time in five months last week and spent much of the haircut sort of, sort of, like making flailing gestures towards small talk that were very, like, so politics are bad!
- Vivek Shraya: [04:05](#) [Laughs]
- Cicely Belle Bl...: [04:08](#) Very relatable.
- Hannah McGregor: [04:10](#) [Laughs] But we're not here to talk about my lost ability to converse with other human beings. We are here to talk about *Burning Sugar*, Cicely's new book, which is the second book under the VS Books imprint from Arsenal Pulp Press. And I am particularly interested in having the opportunity to talk with both of you about the mentorship relationship that is sort of built into VS Books and built into, you know, how this imprint works. So, Vivek, you've been on *Secret Feminist Agenda* before, but maybe you could start by just giving us a little bit of

background about VS Books and, and your choice to sort of create this imprint that's also a mentoring opportunity.

Vivek Shraya: [04:56](#) Yeah, for sure. Did we talk about this last time? Because I don't want to be too redundant.

Hannah McGregor: [04:59](#) I can't remember, and if I can't remember who knows if the listeners can remember.

Vivek Shraya: [05:03](#) Great, well then I'll just give you the whole spiel and Cicely, please bear with me because I'm sure you've heard this a million times. But, basically I think it was in 2016, you know, as I've sort of developed as an artist, it felt really important to share whatever I've learned with, you know, younger BIPOC artists and to find ways to support younger BIPOC artists. And I'm also just like very much a one-on-one person, like the idea of a community meeting kind of terrifies me. [Laughs] And so thinking about like, what is my skillset, what are my abilities to give as an introvert? And so I created an informal mentorship program through my website. I think part of it was also thinking about the fact that like, when I was starting as an artist officially, almost 20 years ago, I, you know, especially as a person color, I didn't have access to a lot of like formal mentorship and, you know, I have lots of opinions and lots of experience in a range of mediums.

Vivek Shraya: [06:05](#) And so it's like, I, I just, I feel like I just want to share that information. And so I created this informal mentorship through my website where people could apply and the point was to select like one artist to work with and I ended up getting like, I think 12 or 13 people who applied and I was supposed to work with one over the course of a year. And then I was like, oh but I would love like reading people's applications, especially because they came in a range of mediums from like visual art to like filmmaking to song writing. I was like, oh, I'd love to work with all of these wonderful, talented young artists. And so I just restructured the mentorship and ended up working with one of them a month. And at the end of 2016, I found myself sort of reevaluating the program and being like, well, was this an effective venture?

Vivek Shraya: [06:52](#) Do I feel like the artists actually got something out of it? And I think the biggest question was just around mentorship. I think that there's this idea that older people have about younger people where it's like "the youth, they need mentorship", but I'm like, do the youth want mentorship? Is that actually what they want? And so I started to really reflect on like what had young artists actually repeatedly told me about what they

wanted. And the most common thread that came up, especially from the young writers that I worked with, was how do I get published? And so I started to think about like, well, if that's the thing that the young artists want the most, maybe more than mentorship is getting in the door. I was like, is there a way that I can facilitate this process? And I thought a lot about my first book *God Loves Hair*, which came out 10 years ago, and how self publishing that book really gave me a foot into the industry.

Vivek Shraya: [07:38](#) You know, despite the stigma around self publishing, creating that book, I think really helped establish me as an emerging writer. And so I was like, I wonder if there's a way for me to self publish a young writer's work and couple that with some sort of mentorship. So this idea of like a hybrid mentorship publishing kind of opportunity started to bubble. And then I was like, you know, at this time, and still in my art, I tend to still fund a lot of my art because I'm working in a range of mediums. So there's a lot of my art that's still not covered. And I was like, I am not a bank.

Hannah McGregor: [08:10](#) [Laughs].

Vivek Shraya: [08:10](#) I am not independent. [Laughs] I'm not financially wealthy. Is there somebody else who could actually like work with me to publish this book? And also, you know, my experience has been that if you work as much as I think self-publishing is amazing and was so rewarding, I have seen the ways that like being tied to an institution actually does give an artist, whether I like it or not, whether I want to fight against it or not does give an artist a kind of legitimacy.

Vivek Shraya: [08:38](#) And so I ended up being like, who has been very supportive of my work over the years? And at that point, I think Arsenal had published four of my books. So I was like, fuck it! I'm going to ask Brian. And so I went to Brian, the publisher at Arsenal Pulp Press, and I was like, listen, I have this wacky idea. Give me an imprint, please. [Laughs]

Vivek Shraya: [08:56](#) And in typical Brian fashion, he was like "this is intriguing." Brian, every time he says "intriguing", I'm always like, I can't tell if this is good intriguing, bad intriguing. Like, there's just, it's, it's a very like [Laughs] gentle generic statement. And so he said it was intriguing [Laughs] and I was like, great. I don't know what that means. And six months later he came back and he's like, let's do it. Which was great. And so it was launched in 2017, the open call and six months later we selected Téa Mutonji, whose first book *Shut Up You're Pretty* did, like beyond what we could have imagined in terms of the program. Like --

Hannah McGregor: [09:31](#) So well.

Vivek Shraya: [09:31](#) --you know. Yeah. Like it did...sorry. Anyways, I usually go on, maybe I'll stop here. You, you gently stopped me. So maybe that's my cue. [Laughs].

Hannah McGregor: [09:43](#) [Laughs] Well--

Vivek Shraya: [09:43](#) Social skills, social skills, social skills. Yes, yes, yes. [Laughs].

Hannah McGregor: [09:49](#) [Laughs] -- It's so hard. I mean, this, this does lead me to a question for Cicely, which is, do you do the youth want mentorship?

Cicely Belle Bl...: [09:55](#) Yeah. Wow. That is a good question.

Vivek Shraya: [09:58](#) [Laughs].

Cicely Belle Bl...: [09:58](#) Yes, I think so. I mean, I think for a long time, I was so curious about the publishing process and like had so many ideas, but was just like, what, like, what do you do with them? Do you just like send them to people? I just had no clue. And so yeah, when I saw the opportunity with VS Books, I was like, oh, this is so wonderful because not only do you get the sort of publishing piece, but so much more than that, and the opportunity to work with Vivek, someone who has published multiple books and also with a local, Vancouver based publishing house, which for me was just so cool. Like so many of my favorite Canadian authors are published with Arsenal Pulp Press. And yeah, I think the mentorship piece was just such a game changer in terms of understanding what the heck is going on in the publishing world and like what you're supposed to do.

Cicely Belle Bl...: [10:55](#) And, you know, what's sort of expected of you and what - yeah-how to navigate every time, especially like, yeah, as a young queer person of color, every time I like am sort of inducted into a new system, I'm like, okay, here's a thousand more barriers that I have to come up against in addition to, you know, all the existing systemic barriers. So it's so wonderful to have the mentorship piece be part of this as kind of a guide, but also a little bit of a, a sort of buffer, I guess, from having to come up against those things all by yourself. So yeah, I definitely think in general, you know, many youth would really benefit from, from a mentorship opportunity.

Hannah McGregor: [11:38](#) That's so interesting to think about how much of this, this mentorship opportunity is about the tacit knowledge that

people often require you to navigate institutions in general and publishing in particular, which is, which is full of secret rules and secret processes. And I mean, I work, I teach in a publishing department and I still don't know entirely how it works, or how people make decisions. And the number of times I've heard people in, in quite high up positions in publishing explain to me that, you know, they make X, Y decision based, not on a particular system, but on gut or intuition, which is --

- Vivek Shraya: [12:25](#) Lies, lies! Fake news. [Laughs].
- Hannah McGregor: [12:30](#) [Laughs] -- and it's also - that is the word that people who don't want to admit their bias use for bias. Like --
- Vivek Shraya: [12:35](#) Exactly, exactly.
- Hannah McGregor: [12:37](#) -- like gut is just a white person word for racism.
- Cicely Belle Bl...: [12:38](#) [Laughs].
- Vivek Shraya: [12:38](#) [Laughs]
- Vivek Shraya: [12:41](#) Yeah. No, totally. And I mean, working with Cicely has been so interesting because like I've been so entrenched in the industry now that sometimes I even forget, like what's knowledge I take for granted, like yesterday, we ended up having a whole conversation around pub day and I was like, yeah, this is like a very bizarre thing because technically, you know, unless you're Margaret Atwood where they like, you know, they'll hide your book in the back until your book comes out. Technically once a bookseller gets the book, they just put them out. So, I mean, even though technically pub day is yada yada day bookstores, don't generally adhere to that. They're like we new book it's out on the shelf. And so I remember just being so confused about that as a young, like when I was first starting and being like, what? I don't understand. Is the book out?
- Vivek Shraya: [13:20](#) Is it not out? And you know, like I sometimes even forget to like clarify those things because they've just become so secondary. So we ended up having like a conversation about it and I was like, oh, I should make like a list of things to like actually in future like flag, because even I am just so yeah, I've just gotten so used to like the invisible parts of the business that are, you just kind of were like, well, I guess that's the way it is. You know--
- Hannah McGregor: [13:42](#) Yeah.

- Vivek Shraya: [13:42](#) -- and what I'm trying to do with the mentorship is like, is try to like make those things a lot more visible. Like even if it's just quote unquote "that's the way it is", at least those things are communicated. So that way a young writer is able to sort of navigate that a little bit more with a little bit more transparency.
- Vivek Shraya: [13:59](#) I can't say I'm always doing a very good job of it, but it is a reminder that there is a lot of those invisible aspects of the business. For sure.
- Hannah McGregor: [14:08](#) I'm sure it's also like, like stepping into that position of being a mentor is also a learning process because figuring out like, you know, what, what needs to be communicated and how, you know, we don't just come with that knowledge pre-packaged.
- Vivek Shraya: [14:24](#) No, and I really want the mentorship to be what they want it to be like, what the, like what Cicely wants it to be, what Téa wants it to be. And I think for me, like the learning curve is also reminding myself that like, what Téa wants is actually not the same thing as what Cicely wants and what the next person wants. Right. And I think, you know, when Cicely and I've worked together, I'm such a phone person because I find it's easier to just like talk through a bunch of issues. And Cicely, like very clearly was like, "not a phone person". [Laughs] I was like, great. This is useful. Assert your boundary, but also, am I doing a terrible job because I'm not giving you information the way I'm used to?
- Hannah McGregor: [14:58](#) [Laughs].
- Vivek Shraya: [14:58](#) You know, so, you know, it's like, it's really, I love, I love, you know, that's the joy of mentorship is actually just like letting I think the other individual really, you know, articulate what they want as opposed to me imposing what I think they want. And again, I don't know that I'm always doing a good job of it, but I think that that's also part of the learning curve is figuring that out.
- Hannah McGregor: [15:21](#) 100 percent. Cicely, did you come into the mentorship with a sense already of what it is that you wanted out of the experience? Were you looking mostly for that sort of publishing industry navigation? Were you looking for help on the manuscript? Did you have a clear sense at all?
- Cicely Belle Bl...: [15:38](#) I think I had some, some ideas and then some goals. I think, you know, yeah, just going back to that piece of how, you know,

having a mentor helps you navigate these systems and any other, you know, a couple of other people, my age who had published work were mainly white and coming from a more privileged social class background. And I was always like, "oh cool, how did you get that?" And they were like, "oh yeah, like my mom works here." Or like, you know, "my uncle works here". And I'm like, oh ok we're not in the same boat.

Vivek Shraya: [16:09](#)

[Laughs].

Cicely Belle Bl...: [16:09](#)

So I was definitely looking for that. Not, not just the tangible guidance, but also the empowerment to, to know how to navigate these systems and like how to stand up for myself in terms of, you know, I, I did not actually know that I would have so much ownership of the process even like, especially with the cover. I did not know that I would get really any say. Like I thought I would just be handing over a lot of control and power of my work. And I think Vivek really helped me to, you know, to stand my ground and to know like which pieces I could sort of guide from my lens. And so yeah, beyond like the tangible pieces, that part was really amazing. And also, yeah, just in terms of, I mean, even still now I just don't, I'm not actually sure if it's a good book or not, but it definitely in the beginning I was like, okay, this is just terrible. And so I definitely need help to, you know, in terms of structure and like which pieces work and which pieces don't. So yeah, I had some ideas, but definitely the opportunity kind of exceeded my expectations in terms of what I learned from the process and, and all of the things that were offered to me in the process as well.

Hannah McGregor: [17:24](#)

Yeah. I love those, those, those really concrete examples of things that you don't know that you don't know them until you come up against them. And the ability to have some artistic control over your book cover's a great example, because I can really see that being a thing that if you don't know that you're allowed to have an opinion, you know, you don't know that you're allowed to push back. And so you don't push back. Which is, I, I know for a lot of authors how they get into situations where things are done to their books that they don't want, because they don't know that they're allowed to say no.

Vivek Shraya: [18:03](#)

Well especially for your first book too. Right. Like I think especially when you're a person of color and you're quote unquote "allowed into these spaces", or invited in these spaces. I mean, I don't know what the experience was like for you Cicely, but for me, I remember just being like, I'd been self published for so long. I'd been rejected for so long that by the time I got in, I was so like, quote, unquote, "grateful" that I

didn't want to like rock the boat too much. And you know, even now to this day, like, you know, 19 years in 18 years in I'm like, I don't ever want to be the ungrateful artist or the difficult artist, you know? And so it's like trying to find, and then trying to find your voice and your opinion and articulate your opinion in the midst of all of that can be so challenging. Right? Cause it's like, oh, well if I pushed back on this particular thing, are they going to maybe never sign another book of mine again? You know, like those were always my, especially in the early days, those were always, my fears was like, you know, how is this destroying my relationship or hurting my relationship. I remember after putting out my first book with Arsenal, I actually asked Brian for a report card. [Laughs].

Hannah McGregor: [19:08](#)

[Laughs]. Aww.

Vivek Shraya: [19:08](#)

This is a very unusual request, but it's like, I just had so much anxiety that I was like a quote unquote, "bad author". And I think again, so much of that does come from being marginalized, right. Where you're just like, anytime you're in a space, once you get into an institution, the fear is always like, they're going to kick me out. I'm not, I'm not good enough. They don't actually value me. I'm difficult, all those things. Right. So anyways...

Hannah McGregor: [19:30](#)

I mean, difficulty is so much like --

Vivek Shraya: [19:33](#)

And it's coded right. Difficulty's coded, right.[Laughs]

Hannah McGregor: [19:36](#)

A hundred percent. I mean, the number of times as a white woman that I have been told or warned that women or femmes of color are difficult to work with, like that, that is exactly --

Vivek Shraya: [19:46](#)

Exactly.

Hannah McGregor: [19:46](#)

-- that is a hundred percent happening. And that is the coded language that is used to say like, Hmm, this person wasn't grateful enough. This person didn't play the game we wanted them to play.

Vivek Shraya: [19:56](#)

Exactly.

Hannah McGregor: [19:57](#)

And creating these opportunities, right, these sort of like, I was going to say intergenerational, but I actually want to come back to the question of generation. But creating these, these mentorship opportunities is, is a really powerful way of sort of building up resilience around, around that kind of expectation

of how you navigate these institutions. It's harder to, you know, label you difficult when you're not the only person.

Vivek Shraya: [20:24](#)

Definitely. Yep.

Hannah McGregor: [20:25](#)

But, so I've mentioned I've, I am interested in this question of, of generation because I keep thinking back to, I think a Facebook post I saw from Kai Cheng Thom, where she was talking about feeling like she is sort of stepping into the position of a mentor or even a community elder, despite the fact that she's in her late twenties, I think? And that there is the sense sometimes that when you are like a queer trans person of color, you are often sort of an elder in your community earlier. That, that you often are sort of like paved a way at, at a young age compared to, you know, when a white man decides that he's ready to say that he's a mentor or an elder now.

Hannah McGregor: [21:11](#)

And I'm wondering in particular, Vivek, about sort of, you know, the next stage of VS books, your call for emerging authors, I think over the age of 40?

Vivek Shraya: [21:22](#)

50.

Hannah McGregor: [21:22](#)

50, over the age of 50. And sort of the, in general sort of your sense of the relationship between mentorship and generation or age, because it seems to be more complicated at the end of the day than saying like, you know, this is about somebody who is not a youth working with youth.

Vivek Shraya: [21:40](#)

Yeah. It's actually extremely complicated. [Laughs] I mean, I totally echo what Kai Cheng said, you know, it was really weird for me to, you know, come into publishing, you know, around 29 and 30 and like, you know, be seen as like quote unquote, "an emerging artist, you know, especially when I finally broke into the like formal publishing world when I was like 34 or 35 and then suddenly be like, okay, you're an elder now. And I was like, wait, how did I go from emerging to elder-dom? [Laughs] Like, how does that happen? [Laughs] And I think it does say so much about, I think what it says is like the barriers for people of color, right? It's like in queer people and marginalized people is like, once you have a certain kind of a quote unquote "success" it's anomalous. And so, you know, part of your responsibility is to make sure that you are creating space for other emerging and often younger, but not always younger.

Vivek Shraya: [22:36](#)

And I think, for me, setting up this mentorship program, the issue of age has been challenging from the beginning because

the first round was I think, 18 to 24. And part of why I've set like that kind of distinction is because for me, it feels a bit strange. You know, I think when I created the mentorship, God, I was like 36. And it was like, well, I don't want to be mentoring someone who's in their thirties. That seems weird. You know, like, but I remember the first callout just getting so many messages from people being like, what about people in their thirties? Or, you know, what about if you're 29 and even 29? I was like, but I'm 36. Like, you know, we're only like seven years apart or whatever. And so the next time around we did widen it. I think it was like 18 to 28.

Vivek Shraya:

[23:21](#)

And then when Téa and I were touring her book, I had a lot of older people be like, well, what about like this group? [Laughs] And it's like, you know, there's so many underrepresented, like if you're a person of color or if you're queer, it's kinda like, it doesn't matter what the ages is, there's all kinds of barriers. And so, you know, even now, you know, once I decided to try and focus on a 50 plus BIPOC writers as a way to sort of acknowledge all kinds of barriers that, that generation of writers face that, you know, I have never had to face. And certainly people younger than me haven't had to face. It still feels a bit strange. Like I'm like, you know, I remember saying to an older woman in the audience who had been like, what about like older writers? And I was like, you know, what could I possibly teach you?

Vivek Shraya:

[24:09](#)

And she's like, respectfully, we're, we're all here because we want to learn from you. And I think for me, that was such an eyeopening moment to like sort of, you know, really complicate the idea of age and knowledge and that, you know, just because someone's a particular age, who's, you know, quote unquote "older" doesn't mean that they don't face barriers, doesn't mean that they're not open to learning, doesn't mean that they don't want to, to yeah, grow or learn. And similarly, like, it's, it's such a funny thing because like, I, I know from experience that I have actually learned more from younger artists in so many ways, like I've grown into who I am in so many ways from working from younger artists. So I, yeah, anyways, I think I've, I've, you know, with, with doing this, this imprint I've really had to dismantle my ideas around age --

Hannah McGregor:

[24:57](#)

Yeah.

Vivek Shraya:

[24:57](#)

--in good ways.

Hannah McGregor: [24:58](#) Yeah. I mean, I personally feel like these days, I learn almost everything I know about gender and sexuality from like TikTok youth.[Laughs]

Vivek Shraya: [25:06](#) Exactly. Exactly!

Hannah McGregor: [25:08](#) Which is like, I'm just going to watch your TikToks and just quietly takes notes. So Cicely let's, let's zoom in a bit on *Burning Sugar*, the book, which I read entirely in one sitting, which I never do for poetry books. So if that says anything about the quality, I mean, I loved it. It's a really beautiful book.

Cicely Belle Bl...: [25:28](#) Thank you so much.

Hannah McGregor: [25:29](#) And there's lots of really interesting stuff happening here at the level of structure and maybe let's start there. Cuz you said, you know, one of the sort of challenges coming into the process was figuring out, you know, how do I structure this? How do I put this together? Did you have like a bunch of poems sort of ready to go and were trying to figure out how to make them into a book?

Cicely Belle Bl...: [25:52](#) Yeah, definitely. I had, yeah, a bunch of poems kind of sitting around in different journals and different weirdly titled word documents.

Hannah McGregor: [26:02](#) [Laughs].

Cicely Belle Bl...: [26:02](#) And yeah, when I saw Vivek's call for writers, you know, I kind of cobbled together what I had and was like, and I, you know, there was like a page minimum for the submission and I was almost there and I was like, okay, let me see if I can add more. And yeah, I definitely had never seen all of those pieces as a book, but when I looked at them altogether, I realized that there was actually quite a lot of flow and connection and, and, and sort of continuous themes throughout all of these pieces that I had written, you know, in random locations or in art galleries or, you know, at particular times. And it was kind of interesting experience for me to, to look at them all together and realize something cohesive could actually come from them. Yeah. So that's kind of how it sort of came together.

Hannah McGregor: [26:52](#) How did you end up deciding on the three part structure, which is place, art and child. Which is, it's such an interesting structure because it's got this sort of, you know, the place poems are poems about, about travel and relationship to place. And so they have this kind of expansive outward movement to them.

And then art poems are the, they're sort of almost like ekphrastic poems, like contemplations of works of art, and then child has this very sort of almost autobiographical like inward facing feeling. So there's a really interesting movement throughout the whole book from, from outwards to inwards. Yeah. I'm curious about how it ended up taking that shape.

Cicely Belle Bl...: [27:38](#)

Yeah, I think mainly the, the place ones are my favourite and kind of my, my sort of predominant style is to just, sorry, I keep saying just, I'm trying not to just say just cause it's more than just it's it's not that simple, but yeah, I think, [Text Notification Ding] that's sort of my favorite thing. And one of the most challenging things about 2020 is being inspired by different places and that feels, that felt easier, like that felt more accessible because it's a lot less personal. It's more of a sort of, yeah, a structural or systemic view of something a sort of slightly removed view. And then it kind of gradually gets deeper. Some of the art pieces are deeper and then yeah, child is obviously very, a very personal section. And I think for me, that kind of emulates my journey of being a poet is feeling that poetry is such a good opportunity to be personal and to, you know, spill a lot of yourself and your trauma and your also your joy onto a page, but also the part that I find the most challenging.

Cicely Belle Bl...: [28:46](#)

And so that's kind of, yeah, kind of like I was imagining it sort of like, as you go through like a math textbook at the beginning, it's easy and accessible and, but when you get to the end, it's really hard.

Hannah McGregor: [28:57](#)

[Laughs].

Cicely Belle Bl...: [28:57](#)

So that's kind of how I imagined it and yeah, definitely a lot of the pieces in the child chapter were newer, like newer additions and, and things that I'd never really put down on paper before. Whereas the sort of art and travel ones were a lot more sort of things that I'd collected over the years. And so I think it also spoke to sort of my growth as a person and how I have become more confident and comfortable in talking firstly to myself, but also to others about my life and my upbringing and kind of what shaped me as a person.

Hannah McGregor: [29:34](#)

Yeah. That, that really stood out in reading it that sense of the intimacy and interiority of that, of that final section. It's so it's so vulnerable, isn't it just writing about yourself and then letting other people read it?

Cicely Belle Bl...: [29:47](#)

It's really vulnerable, yeah. [Laughs].

Hannah McGregor: [29:47](#) Yeah. What, what a wild experience. I have to, I have to say as I was reading it through the first time I cried several times during the place poems, because boy did they make me miss going places.

Cicely Belle Bl...: [30:03](#) Yeah. [Laughs]

Hannah McGregor: [30:03](#) [Laughs] Like wow. Wow. There's this whole beautiful world and here we are trapped in these apartments.

Cicely Belle Bl...: [30:09](#) I know. Yeah. It's definitely been a struggle I'm sure for a lot of folks. And I think also also what I wanted to capture in that part was kind of how for myself, as a British person, I've never really faced any struggles in terms of the logistics of traveling. Like I can, I have the privilege of being able to go anywhere, but then the rest of my identity as like a Black queer fat femme is very much at odds with that privilege of, of being British. And so it's like, yes, I can go anywhere, but everywhere I go, there's still going to be these additional layers to my experience, that would obviously be very different for like a white British person. And I think, yeah, I think it's definitely, yeah, such a complex time to be in. And I think it's almost a bit of, I don't know, divine intervention that like this book is coming out at this time where we can't go to any of these places and kind of pushing people to think about, yeah, just the complexity, like how travel is such a privilege, but also doesn't come without struggle and doesn't come without complications for a lot of people and --

Hannah McGregor: [31:24](#) Yeah. Yeah.

Cicely Belle Bl...: [31:26](#) --Yeah.

Hannah McGregor: [31:26](#) And is, is complicated and nuanced as well by that diasporic relationship to place. Right. That sense that that leaving the place that you were born or the place that you currently live is also a kind of homecoming that is also never quite a homecoming because that place has never been your home. But, but that also just, you know, layers complexity onto the act of travel, particularly the act of travel as, as I think, you know, I see people talking about it right now as a kind of luxury. That I, I was thinking as I was reading those poems about a tweet from a friend of the podcast, Baharak Yousefi tweeted back in July about sort of, you know, the way people have been, have been talking about travel in the midst of the pandemic, and how for people of color, the capacity to leave the overwhelmingly white culture of Vancouver is a kind of lifeline, like an opportunity to just get out sometimes. And that, that framing travel exclusively

as luxury really undermines the actual complexity of people's relationship to place.

- Cicely Belle Bl...: [32:33](#) Yeah. I think there's kind of a very sort of distinctive experience happening right now where some people are like, "oh, I really miss going to the beach in Bali". And some people are like, "I really miss my like dying relatives"--
- Hannah McGregor: [32:45](#) [Laughs].
- Cicely Belle Bl...: [32:45](#) --you know, who I cannot visit. And there's like clearly very distinct experiences there. And, and I, yeah, I, even though obviously the poems were not written in this context, I still hope that people kind of are able to just kind of complicate what it means to live in such a globalized and interconnected world.
- Hannah McGregor: [33:07](#) Yeah. There's an interesting similarity in the pieces about art as well. There's, you know, there's another poem in there that, that acknowledges, you know, that a youth spent visiting art galleries in some ways is a privilege that not everybody is going to art galleries and learning from them. And at the same time, you know, going to the Tate Modern and that being the space where you get to encounter like the history of Black art and the civil rights movement is not, it's more complex than, than just a privilege to be able to go that institution. It's, it's also a sort of encounter with the history of imperialism and anti-Black racism that again, sort of just massively complicates the whole idea of what is, what is a luxury versus what is a thing that you need to survive.
- Cicely Belle Bl...: [33:59](#) Absolutely. And yeah, growing up with a mother who is an artist and art teacher, she's always kind of instilled in me this, this understanding of art as, yeah, it shouldn't be a luxury, everybody should be able to observe and engage in and participate in and feel, feel anything, feel joy from seeing art. And I think, yeah, art in so many forms is so elitist and just kind of the irony of, of going to such a big art gallery, like the Tate gallery in London, named after the Tate & Lyle sugar company, which is also kind of an inspiration for the title as well of the book. And yeah, just the complexities of it's this big sort of monstrous building in London. That's probably been there hundreds of years and you go in to these white walls and then you pay extra to see this specific exhibition about Black art.
- Cicely Belle Bl...: [34:56](#) And yeah, just like the complexity of that and how it's not as, like art has so much more meaning than I think people give it credit for like, especially in terms of galleries, especially in London, are often filled with white middle class people and

them looking at art about Black resistance is so different from me looking at art about Black resistance. And how for a lot of folks it's kind of, yeah, it's just, I don't know, it's just a day out for them, but for me, it's, it's just so much, so much deeper than that.

- Hannah McGregor: [35:27](#) Yeah. I mean, it, all of this is really putting me in mind of Audre Lorde's famous quote, that poetry is not a luxury.
- Cicely Belle Bl...: [35:34](#) Mm-hmm.
- Hannah McGregor: [35:34](#) And that sense, I mean, I, I get that sense throughout this book that there's a sort of immediacy and urgency to how poetry is being put to work in this volume that really speaks to that. And to the entanglement of poetry with activist work in particular. Because there's a real sense of the way that activist language is woven through these poems in a lot of ways. Is that, is that something that you were thinking about deliberately, like I'm going to bring that language in? Or is that part of the vocabulary that you use to communicate?
- Cicely Belle Bl...: [36:08](#) Hmm. Yeah, I think probably kind of a bit of both. Yeah, partly intentional, but also just, just the way I write --
- Hannah McGregor: [36:17](#) Yeah.
- Cicely Belle Bl...: [36:17](#) --in general, I can't help, but bring in that lens. Like, I, I, I think another sort of challenge with the work as well was my main sort of relationship with poetry is basically like everybody else's. You learn, like, I don't know, Frost in high school and then that's it and --
- Hannah McGregor: [36:35](#) Fucking Wordsworth. Fuck that guy.
- Cicely Belle Bl...: [36:37](#) --Yeah. [Laughs] Yeah. And you're in, you're kind of like, oh, poetry is supposed to be sort of idyllic and beautiful and like about, I don't know, nature, or like you don't often get the opportunity to explore poetry that is radical and uncomfortable and sort of exposes anti-Blackness and exposes systemic oppression. So I kind of was just like, okay, let me try to write in a way that maybe I would give a speech at a protest, for example. And yeah. And see if that's a thing that resonates with people. And I think maybe it does.[Laughs]
- Hannah McGregor: [37:14](#) Yeah. I think it really does. I think, I think, again, it sort of saturates the language with this, with this urgency that sort of makes it leap off the page as you're reading it in a way that is

viscerally similar to the experience of being at a protest because that language has this sort of, you know, their, their speech acts, right? Like when we, when we say things that protests were like speaking a different world into existence.

Cicely Belle Bl...: [37:36](#)

Mm-hmm.

Hannah McGregor: [37:36](#)

And that is a thing poetry can do as well. I was thinking, as you were, as you were making that point about, you know, how often we're taught that poetry has to be about like flowers. [Laughs] So I was thinking about, I had some students read Jessica John's chapbook last semester and they were all, so they were really grappling collectively with poems that were not quote unquote "timeless and universal," because that was how they understood poetry was supposed to operate.

Hannah McGregor: [38:10](#)

And I had a conversation afterwards with my friend Bart about anthologies and how we sort of teach people incorrect things about poetry based on how anthologies are chosen. And in particular, the poems that are never anthologized are occasional poems, poems that people actually write about things that are happening right now, because there's the sense that they'll age badly, I guess? And I remember this moment of like, like absolute sort of eyeopening, surprise and shock the first time I read the poetry that Langston Hughes wrote while in Spain, like participating in the Spanish Civil war and the fight against fascism.

Cicely Belle Bl...: [38:55](#)

[Mm-hmm].

Hannah McGregor: [38:55](#)

Which I was like, this is not, again, it's like poetry is activism. Like poetry is tied up with these, these political moments in which people are using their writing as part of their tool set to do the work that they are trying to do in the world.

Hannah McGregor: [39:11](#)

And then that that's not the Langston Hughes that gets anthologized and taught.

Cicely Belle Bl...: [39:15](#)

Yeah. So true. So true.

Hannah McGregor: [39:17](#)

Vivek, I would like to bring you back in via a question about poetry, which is the editing of poetry. As somebody who reads a lot of poetry, I never had the opportunity to edit poetry until, until I worked on *Refuse*, the anthology in which it, that was part of my job was I was assigned some of the poems. And I found it personally wildly intimidating to edit somebody else's poetry. I think probably for me in part, because I am not a poet.

I am, I am just a reader and studier of poetry. But I'm wondering, you know, how different it was working on a volume of poetry or working with a volume of poetry as opposed to Téa's book, which is a sort of short story cycle.

Vivek Shraya: [40:04](#) Yeah. I mean, I find it very intimidating as well [Laughs]. Especially as someone you know, listening to your conversation and like the poets that you are quoting. I mean, I'm familiar with some and some work I'm not. And I think poetry is one area where I don't feel, I mean, in general, to be honest, like I, I have less and less imposter syndrome, the older I get, but certainly as an English quote, unquote "English teacher" TM --

Hannah McGregor: [40:28](#) [Laughs].

Vivek Shraya: [40:28](#) I definitely feel [Laughs] I definitely feel, don't want to say under-qualified, but, underexposed perhaps. I don't know. Where I'm just like, not super familiar with a lot of the canon and it's, it's never been something that's been super interesting to me. And so, you know, when it comes to editing poetry in particular, you know, I'd say there's definitely some gaps in my, my understanding of poetry I guess. For me, you know, I almost take like a music approach to it and, you know, really thinking about, do the word sing on the page? You know. Are the, are the words doing everything they possibly can do?

Vivek Shraya: [41:08](#) And are the line breaks, like doing everything that they could possibly can do? Or can a line break be added to enhance the impact of the word. And so it's really just going line by line saying it out loud, kind of treating it almost as though it's something I've written, but the difference is also trying to stay out of the writer's way. Like I think, you know, going back to the conversation around language that both of you were having, I think one of the things I sort of struggle with as someone who comes from, or who's sort of been involved in, loosely very, very loosely, in sort of like queer and adjacent activist communities is the way that, which activist language can be so important. I'm not articulating this point really well, but I think as a person of color, for me, there's been a really beautiful and necessary usage around language to be able to just name something.

Vivek Shraya: [42:03](#) So if something is racist to call it racist, if something is heteronormative to call it heteronormative, if something is white supremacist to call it white supremacist. And I, but at the same time, you know, one of the things I struggle with, and I, again, I don't know if this is the model minority in me, I don't know if this is white supremacy, but I think one of the things I struggle with in my own writing as a personal color is the

accessibility of that language. You know, like I think because we're in sort of politicized activist adjacent or activist, or, you know, academic circles, there's a lot of words that are very accessible to us. And that have power for us, which I think is important as writers. But you know, at the same time I am conscious of the reader and are there other ways to say something that might be more accessible to the reader?

Vivek Shraya: [42:56](#) And is that a question even worth asking? Right. Especially because the flip side is the reader in Canada, unfortunately, will largely be predominantly white.

Hannah McGregor: [43:05](#) [Mm-hmm].

Vivek Shraya: [43:05](#) And so, you know, anyways, this is a very convoluted, I'm not making a really good point here, but I guess my point is, I think for me, one of the things I really struggled, I struggled with, with Cicely's work is like wanting to stay out of their way. Like I never want to disenfranchise, or de-motivate a writer from just speaking their truth and using the language that feels powerful and right to them. At the same time, it feels important to also, I guess, ask questions, you know, I think that's like, I think a good editor in some ways it's really about staying out of the way, but also just asking good questions. Like, is this the most effective way to communicate what you're saying?

Vivek Shraya: [43:41](#) And, you know, I think because Cicely comes from a background of education, I think that, like for me, I was like some of the language at times, I'm like, this makes sense in, let's say a diversity workshop and do we want to have that same impact in the poetry? Does it have the same impact in poetry? And if yes, great. And that's the question is just sort of figuring out what language works best in the context of a poem, as opposed to a protest or a workshop. And, you know, it was interesting hearing Cicely talk because I think, you know, they're also right that, like why can't the language that works in a protest be included in poetry? You know, like why is there a line there? And I don't think that there is one, I think it's just about thinking that through. And so I think ultimately for me, the way that I sort of wrestle with like, you know, my own stuff around this is just to sort of pose questions, but also try to be supportive. Like, I think the thing that I try to tell all young writers that I work with is like, ultimately, you know your work better than I do trust your own intuition. And, and I think that's all I can do ultimately.

Hannah McGregor: [44:48](#) Yeah. Yeah. And that framing in terms of questions is so key because it doesn't assume you understand their poetry better than they do.

Vivek Shraya: [44:55](#) Exactly. Exactly.

Hannah McGregor: [44:57](#) Yeah.

Vivek Shraya: [44:57](#) Exactly. And I, and again, I think it's a difficult balance because I'm also a writer and because even though I'm not Black and I don't have Cicely's experience, I definitely identify with a lot of their poems. Like, I mean, their book, you know, stood out to me largely because it can, I connected with it even despite our experience. And so I think, but, and that's a beautiful thing, but that can also be a dangerous thing as an editor. Because like Cicely's voice is Cicely's voice. Like what Cicely's trying to say, Isn't what I'm trying to say. Sorry to talk about you in third person Cicely, I know you're here. [Laughs]

Hannah McGregor: [45:30](#) [Laughs].

Cicely Belle Bl...: [45:30](#) No worries.

Hannah McGregor: [45:34](#) That that question though, of, of managing audience is such a key one. And I know it's one we've been having in publishing a lot lately. You know, is the question of, of at what point do writers of color get to stop writing for white people? And that is so tricky in the context of Canadian publishing, because you've got this sort of ouroboros of like, publishers know who their audience is and their audience is mostly middle class white people, but their audience is mostly middle class white people because that's who books, the books they've published have been for. [Laughs]. And so like at what point do you break open that circle and say, yeah, those readers can read this book, but I'm not going to write this book for them. This book is going to be for, for my community. This book is going to be for Black femmes and other people can read the book if they want. You know, I know that's a conversation that has happened a lot in the last couple of years around Indigenous literature in Canada. The sense that like, I'm going to write a book that's for other Indigenous readers and settlers can, can absolutely read it, but it's not for them.

Hannah McGregor: [46:43](#) And that question really shifts the degree to which literature has to be pedagogical as well. That sense of like, am I writing to somebody who doesn't share these experiences and trying to explain them and teach them about what these experiences are

like, or am I writing to my community and, and not doing that sort of playing catch up, you know? Insisting that instead you can just do the Google yourself and figure it out.

Vivek Shraya: [47:12](#)

Yeah.

Hannah McGregor: [47:12](#)

Cicely, do you have, do you have a sense of, of the audience you had in mind when you were writing this book?

Cicely Belle Bl...: [47:17](#)

Mainly I think fellow Black queer and trans folks. Yeah. I think sometimes I'm sort of overwhelmed by the enormity of systemic oppression. And I think as an activist, I sometimes sort of get bogged down in this futility of everything and how, you know, we can't really change anything and progress is so slow and all of these things. And I think with, with the book, I felt more like I was able to, you know, even if just like one or two people read it and feel like, feel some kind of resonance with it and feel a connection to it and feel moved by it, I think that's really who I wanted the book to be for. But it definitely was difficult, I guess, to sort of like decolonize my mind from like knowing that white folks will also read it and kind of with some pieces felt myself questioning and being like, ooh, is this too intense?

Cicely Belle Bl...: [48:08](#)

Is this, this too radical? Will I like offend people? Yeah. There's just those things that were also, I think, will always be in the back of our minds in general of like, that's going to be the majority of the audience. But yeah, I still kind of hope and I already have had, you know, folks in my community come to me and say, Oh, I really liked that piece. Like, it really struck me, or I feel exactly the same way. It was great to see that written down, or, you know, to know that I'm not alone in that feeling. So yeah, that feels good.

Hannah McGregor: [48:36](#)

That experience, the sort of ungaslighting of having somebody say like --

Cicely Belle Bl...: [48:40](#)

[Laughs].

Hannah McGregor: [48:40](#)

-- this experience is real and I have also had it and you are not making it up is such an incredibly powerful thing.

Cicely Belle Bl...: [48:46](#)

Yeah, definitely.

Hannah McGregor: [48:47](#)

Yeah. I can, I can imagine you, as Vivek points out the fact that you also do this work sort of consulting on diversity and equity with organizations, which is really pedagogical work --

Cicely Belle Bl...: [48:59](#) Mm-hmm.

Hannah McGregor: [48:59](#) -- but that that's, that's in some ways a real shift or at least a different, yeah, like a different kind of lens for coming at, at how you frame things.

Cicely Belle Bl...: [49:11](#) Yeah, definitely. Yeah. I think for me, the underpinning of everything I do will always be about education in some form or another. And this was a great opportunity for me to still be able to explain to people how anti-Blackness functions or how sexism functions or, you know, how these things work. But in a way that will maybe touch a different audience or will, you know, reach people in a different way and hopefully build more empathy perhaps than I'm able to build in like a corporate workshop, for example --

Hannah McGregor: [49:43](#) [Laughs]

Cicely Belle Bl...: [49:43](#) --just simply because, you know, I think when people are reading your book, I think they're already in that sort of head space of being open to, to see in your perspective and have, have opened it because they're like, oh, I'm curious how this person experiences the world. Yeah, so it's definitely was difficult to not be too like lecture-y, but be more like hoping that people will sort of read between a lot of the lines and be like, oh, okay, because of the way that they talked about watching videos of Black folks being murdered, for example, and like, obviously most people understand the violence of that, but I don't think a lot of people understand the impact of Black folks watching that happening. And so I hope that sort of lens provides a different angle for people as well.

Hannah McGregor: [50:33](#) Mm-hmm. That point about empathy and the possibilities of literature, you know, creating these spaces of empathy is both a really hopeful idea. Right? I know it's for those of us who love books, a sort of hopeful idea, we come back to a lot like, [Laughs] maybe reading, maybe books could make things better. That would be great.

Cicely Belle Bl...: [50:56](#) [Laughs].

Hannah McGregor: [50:56](#) And, and, and at the same time, it makes me think back to, to Vivek's piece on being a trauma clown and the sort of that, that tension right between, between, you know, knowing the possibility of literature to evoke empathy and to expand people's sense of the world, and also that sort of that expectation sometimes that does seem to be put on, on BIPOC

writers, which is like, okay, well show your pain to the world, and then maybe there will be an empathetic response to it.

- Cicely Belle Bl...: [51:27](#) Mm-hmm.
- Hannah McGregor: [51:29](#) And this book really feels to me like it is in a lot of ways pushing against or refusing anything that would be easily appropriated into those kinds of narratives, in a way that actually really, to me, is similar to Vivek's writing as well. That there isn't kind of an easy, like, here here's some trauma enjoy. You may discuss it at your book club --
- Vivek Shraya: [51:52](#) [Laughs].
- Hannah McGregor: [51:52](#) -- because there's, there's because, because it's so much more sort of complex and layered in terms of the way these experiences are evoked. It makes them, it makes them hard to just consume.
- Cicely Belle Bl...: [52:06](#) Yeah, absolutely. I hope it just sort of provides some discomfort, but also if it's possible to be uncomfortable, but also find it accessible at the same time of like, yeah, this is, this is sort of going beyond what I could possibly say in a, in a different format I think.
- Hannah McGregor: [52:23](#) Yeah. Providing, providing some helpful discomfort is a great [Laughs] way of putting it --
- Vivek Shraya: [52:30](#) [Laughs].
- Cicely Belle Bl...: [52:30](#) [Laughs].
- Hannah McGregor: [52:30](#) --I love that. So before we wrap up, could you just tell me your top dinosaur?
- Cicely Belle Bl...: [52:37](#) [Laughs] My favorite dinosaur is the Parasaurolophus. I have one tattooed on my arm. I like them because they're very community oriented. They like to protect not only their own kin, but if they see other nests with eggs left, I don't know why I'm talking about them in present tense. [Laughs]
- Hannah McGregor: [52:56](#) No this is correct. Absolutely. Talk about dinosaurs in the present tense.
- Vivek Shraya: [53:01](#) [Laughs].
- Cicely Belle Bl...: [53:01](#) -- it's like 90 million years ago.

Hannah McGregor: [53:01](#) [Laughs].

Vivek Shraya: [53:01](#) [Laughs].

Cicely Belle Bl...: [53:02](#) But yeah, if they see other nests with, with abandoned eggs, they'll take those eggs and raise them as their own. So I think that's very sweet. [Laughs]

Hannah McGregor: [53:10](#) That's incredibly beautiful. Vivek, do you have a favourite dinosaur?

Vivek Shraya: [53:13](#) I mean, like I was saying before we started, I just found out that there's like an Edmontosaurus and an Albertosaurus --

Cicely Belle Bl...: [53:18](#) [Laughs].

Vivek Shraya: [53:18](#) --and it just, you know, as someone from Edmonton, Alberta, I just feel like I need to stan. I don't know, like very much, I just started reading about them. Maybe they're awful creatures, but I feel like, you know, I need to rep the hometown home city dinosaurs, you know.

Hannah McGregor: [53:33](#) No, no dinosaurs are awful creatures.

Vivek Shraya: [53:35](#) [Laughs].

Hannah McGregor: [53:35](#) They're all, they're all beautiful and perfect in their own way.

Vivek Shraya: [53:38](#) Right.[Laughs].

Hannah McGregor: [53:39](#) They're all just, they're all just doing their job. And sometimes their job is to be, you know, an adorable pack of herbivores and sometimes their job is to --

Vivek Shraya: [53:50](#) Ravage.

Hannah McGregor: [53:50](#) -- eat that adorable pack of herbivores. You know?

Vivek Shraya: [53:51](#) [Laughs].

Hannah McGregor: [53:51](#) It's the circle of life.

Vivek Shraya: [53:55](#) Yes.

Hannah McGregor: [53:55](#) Alright, thank you both so much. This has been a really wonderful conversation.

New Speaker: [53:59](#)

[Music: "Spirit" by Beyoncé]

Hannah McGregor: [54:13](#)

If you want to learn more about Vivek and Cicely's work and buy Cicely's book, check out the links in the show notes. Those notes, as well as all the previous episodes are available at [secretfeministagenda.com](http://secretfeministagenda.com). You can follow me on Twitter at [@hkpmcgregor](https://twitter.com/hkpmcgregor) and you can tweet about the podcast using the hashtag [#secretfeministagenda](https://twitter.com/secretfeministagenda). And of course you can review the show. Since June, which is the last time I released an episode, there are new reviews from pink-trash, SaRahRah\_WA. Maybe? Incredible. And Rach891. Thank you all so much for your lovely reviews. The podcast theme song is "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans off their album *Chub Rub*. You can download the entire album on [freemusicarchive.org](http://freemusicarchive.org) or follow them on Facebook. Cicely's theme song was 'Spirit' by Beyoncé. This episode was 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. [Theme Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans]