

## Episode 4.25 Mentorship

September 25, 2020

Hannah McGregor: [00:10](#) [Theme Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans]. Hi, I'm Hannah McGregor, and this is *Secret Feminist Agenda*. And gosh, I wish the sound of my refrigerator and fan in the background weren't so extremely loud all the time. I mean, listen to this [Whirring of Refrigerator and Fan]. Thanks. I hate it. What I don't hate is the fact that the rains came this weekend in Vancouver and temporarily cleared away the smoke from the forest fires. And we all got to see the sky and breathe the air again. And despite my anxious brain's desire to fixate always on the worst things that are happening, there's something about the presence of the smoke and then the absence of the smoke that is really just making me deeply grateful for being able to go for a bike ride right now. But as much as I'm sure you're all dying to listen to an episode about climate grief or living through global crises with anxiety. Hmm—mm. That's not what we're talking about. We're talking about something entirely different on this episode. So, uh, let's get right into it. [Theme Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans].

Hannah McGregor: [01:27](#) In the last episode, I framed my conversation with Vivek Shraya and Cicely Belle Blain in terms of an interest and a sort of sub theme I want to explore, which is mentorship. And I'm particularly interested in thinking about and exploring mentorship right now in this moment, as I'm trying to figure out what to do with *Secret Feminist Agenda* moving forward. This project has been and continues to be incredibly valuable to me, particularly as a space where I've been able to develop a voice for myself as a scholar and think through in both granular and general ways, what kind of work I want to do. And most excitingly for me, I've been able to think through those, those big questions of what I think feminist scholarship can or should look like via dialogue and conversation, both in interviews with really interesting guests doing really interesting kinds of work,

and also via the kinds of responses that I get from listeners on social media and emails and in person.

Hannah McGregor: [02:37](#)

The podcast has allowed me to open out my sense of what the scholarly looks like and my sense of what kind of work I can do and what kind of work is legitimate scholarly work. And meanwhile, I've been working on projects like the Amplify Podcast Network that are committed to building out the infrastructure around scholarly podcasting, such that this work is not only for me. That I'm not the only one who gets to do something nontraditional and have it count. And I've been thinking a lot about that kind of capacity building and what it means to dedicate your energy not necessarily to doing the thing yourself, but rather to expanding the capacity in general for the thing to be done. That was very vague. And I've been thinking about the kind of work that it's valuable for me to be doing right now at this stage of my career, as somebody with institutional stability in a deeply precarious world. All of which is to say I've been imagining a fifth season of *Secret Feminist Agenda* that will work as a kind of mentorship opportunity. Essentially that rather than me producing episodes, I would work with other scholars to help them produce episodes.

Hannah McGregor: [04:00](#)

I haven't worked out exactly what that would look like yet, but I have started thinking in serious ways what it looks like to deliberately and thoughtfully step into the role of being a mentor and the kinds of feelings that creates in me for me. Because first and foremost, the idea of declaring myself a mentor fills me with the most intense imposter syndrome. It's one thing to say, "You know, okay, I'm an academic, I'm a scholar. I've got things to say. I have proven myself in these particular realms of expertise that I have." And it's a whole other thing to be like, [Laughs] "Everybody gather round and learn from me." Ironic perhaps considering the fact that I'm literally a teacher. And that in fact, asking people to gather round and learn from me is a big part of what I do. [Laugh] But I realize as I think about, and, and feel my way through that anxiety that the idea of being a mentor inspires in me, that I've got some fairly conservative or limited ideas in my mind of what constitutes mentorship.

Hannah McGregor: [05:19](#)

And that's why I've been inspired to look at other models and to deliberately expand my thinking around, you know, what it means to be a mentor, including assumptions about seniority and expertise and experience, and the way mentorship might operate according to hierarchical models. Right? The way that that me saying, "Oh, I would like to be a mentor" means that I am saying, "That's because I'm an unassailable expert in this

area. And other people are sort of below me on the ladder of scholarly podcasting. And so I have this knowledge and these opportunities to extend to them." And when I look at models of mentorship like VS Books, I see that there is this possibility to rethink mentorship outside of hierarchies, outside of those kinds of ossified power dynamics and outside of traditional notions of expertise and experience, and even of age requirements. 36 is a weird, is a weird in between age where I am very much not young, but also not old yet.

Hannah McGregor: [06:30](#)

Mmm. Depends on who you ask. All of which is to say that, that as I think about what it would mean to lean into that desire to build capacity actively, I'm also really interested in what is involved in rethinking mentorship and what mentorship can look like and what kinds of relationships we can imagine that might sort of fall within that term. And I think almost inevitably, when I try to think about what kind of mentor I would like to be, or what kind of mentorship I would like to model, I think back on and look at the kinds of mentorship relationships I've had in my own life. Who have been my mentors, what have I learned from them and what do I want to bring forward into my own work? And when I look back on my experience, being mentored in academia, what I see is a long history of me getting in trouble for not respecting the hierarchies of how power works in the university, and me learning how to play those hierarchy game in order to get what I wanted out of those relationships. One of the pivotal mentors during my undergraduate, in the sense of somebody who wrote me letters of recommendation, who read my grad school applications and my grant applications, and gave me feedback, who offered material support in terms of helping me to take that next step in my academic career, was a professor I originally had helped my classmates to organize a protest against because of unjust teaching practices.

Hannah McGregor: [08:20](#)

And I realized fairly quickly during my undergrad that demanding justice and pushing back against the way things are organized is not an effective way to get people with power on your side. And I learned how to play the game differently. I learned how to be the kind of student who those professors wanted to support, which absolutely did not include pointing out the inequities and injustices in the way they ran their classes. This is a lesson I had to learn again in my PhD when I got in trouble multiple times for, say a level of confidence or bravado that was unbecoming of my role as a junior scholar. And I had to learn how to apologize and make myself smaller and know my place. And for a while, I became somebody who told a lot of other people how to know their place.

Hannah McGregor: [09:23](#) I once gave a dear friend the advice that if she wanted to make it in academia, she had to not talk back to well positioned faculty members no matter how how rude or belittling they had been, because they could be on a hiring committee in the future. Or they could be deciding a grant that you want to get. And I hate that. I gave that advice, but I really believed it. And even with some of the best mentors I've had in my life, people who have, who have really encouraged me, and again, provided concrete material, practical support. Reading my CV, reading drafts of articles, talking me through the minutia of professionalization. The, the things that are often tacit knowledge, you know, people who, people who really materially helped me also made sure I knew when I was stepping out of line, made sure to remind me of my place within the strict hierarchies of the university.

Hannah McGregor: [10:28](#) And a big part of this project for me has been unlearning a lot of what I learned throughout my education, and throughout these experiences of mentorship. Unlearning that belief, that in order to make it in academia, one has to know their place and not talk back to authority figures and make yourself into the kind of person people want to help. That has involved for me as a publicly engaged feminist scholar, learning how to talk back to power and to say things that feel risky and scary for me. And those are things I can do now that probably I could have also done as a student, but I didn't know I could do them. Or heck maybe I'm being unfair on my student self. Maybe I couldn't really have done those things, but I can now. I've got academic freedom and a tenure track job.

Hannah McGregor: [11:27](#) And that also means that I can support other people in figuring out how to say the things that they want to say and foster the forms of resistance that they think are important. And also materially navigate the complexities of this institution because that kind of mentorship and that kind of support, even when it came with conditions was still wildly beneficial to me. Academia is all secret rules and unwritten policies and inaccessible systems. And if you don't have somebody there who knows how it works, who can help to walk you through it, you're kind of hooped. You know, at a even more metta level as I, as I think through what it means to step into the role of the mentor, I also find myself thinking through what it means to value the mentorship that I myself received, even when maybe it wasn't the mentorship I wished I would have gotten.

Hannah McGregor: [12:28](#) I've been thinking a lot over the past couple of years about what it means to push against, resist, or outright reject some of the ideas and approaches and beliefs of people who have been

mentors or heroes or inspirations for us without, you know, taking those people and throwing them into the garbage bin of history. You know, what does it mean to look at somebody like Margaret Atwood and say, "Wow, I do not like a lot of the things you're doing with your platform right now, but that doesn't, you mean that you weren't an important role model for me at a time when I needed somebody to show me that it was possible to be a woman in the public eye who wasn't nice to people." I might look back at some of my own mentors and say, "Gosh, I wish you had seen me as, as a full human and not, you know, a brain in a jar to sort of, to mold into the most successful, possible academic." But I can also see and value the kinds of energy and labor and time that I was gifted with that have made a massive difference in the shape of my career and the shape of my life.

Hannah McGregor: [13:39](#)

Can I look back at the mentors I've had in my life and be grateful for the things they taught me and also know that some of the things they taught me are things I have needed desperately to unlearn and put aside and explicitly reject in some cases? And that doesn't mean I wasn't mentored even that I wasn't mentored well, just that I don't want to do it the same way. And I think the nice thing about having a little more compassion for the mentors who both helped me and in other ways, profoundly failed me, is that, it also reminds me that I will hopefully help people and will probably fail people. And at the same time, I really, really hope to be the kind of mentor to whom somebody can say, "Hey, you're really failing me right now." And I can hear that because I'm not so committed to the hierarchical structures of the university.

Hannah McGregor: [14:37](#)

I'd love to hear from you about some of your, maybe better experiences of mentorship. What has, what has good and productive and healthy mentorship looked like for you in your life? Have you stepped into the role of the mentor yourself in your field? And if so, what was that like? What did that look like? Have you fucked up as a mentor and what did you learn from that? What can we share with each other as we imagine new models for feminist mentorship that doesn't rely on old notions of expertise and hierarchy. I'm excited to learn more about that. [Theme Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans].

Hannah McGregor: [15:15](#)

Alright, we've got time for a quick peek into our Killjoy Survival Kits. [Sound Effect: Chest Creaking Open.]

Hannah McGregor: [15:24](#)

I don't have any new emails, unsurprising, because I have been on hiatus for a while, but I'm going to tell you that right now at the top of my Killjoy Survival Kit is sharing goofy pop culture

with friends. During the pandemic, I got friend of the podcast, former guest, Claire, super into *Critical Role*, the live played Dungeons and Dragons web series that I am deeply obsessed with and unironically emotionally invested in. And now that she has listened through the like 300 hours of back catalog and is caught up, we get to watch the new episodes together when they come out. I mean, she's in Edmonton, so not physically together, but we sync them up and then text each other as we watch them. And it is so deeply comforting for me, sharing culture with friends, sharing things I love with friends. It feels like such a rich way to connect.

Hannah McGregor:

[16:24](#)

That is also fun and can keep things light in the midst of hard times. You know, we don't always have to talk about how we're doing emotionally. Sometimes we can just talk about what we think about the emotional journey of that particular Firbolg. If you would like to tell me about something that's in your Killjoy Survival Kit, go ahead and shoot me an email at [secretfeministagenda@gmail.com](mailto:secretfeministagenda@gmail.com). [Sound Effect: Chest Slamming Shut]. As always, you can find show notes and the rest of the episodes of *Secret Feminist Agenda* on [secretfeministagenda.com](http://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 don't forget to rate and review the show. It's the best way for new listeners to find us, and well, the show could definitely use a bump because hiatuses are not good for podcasts. Shout out to [wordnerd66](#) for their incredibly lovely and kind review. The podcast theme song is "Mesh Shirt" by MomJeans off their album *Chub Rub* and you can download the entire album on [freemusicarchive.org](http://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 am grateful to live and work. This has been Secret Feminist Agenda. Pass it on. [Theme Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans]