

Episode 4.26 Becoming “The Man” with Lily Cho

October 9, 2020

- Hannah McGregor: [00:00:00](#) [Theme Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans] Hi, I'm Hannah McGregor, and this is *Secret Feminist Agenda*, and it's 7:30 AM on a Friday morning. I'm sitting under my light therapy lamp because it's still dark in the mornings now. And the last-minute nature of this introduction recording is pretty much the vibe of this week for me. It's kind of one of those weeks where not only do I keep dropping balls, but I don't even notice I'm dropping them until I look down and they're all of these balls on the ground, and I'm like, "who put all those balls there?" [Laughs] Oh wait. It was me. Those were all emails I was supposed to answer. That's fine. It's earlier in the semester than the state of overwhelm usually hits, but that's not all that surprising considering how much harder everything is right now. I hope whatever you're up to you're being kind with yourself about the various balls that you are dropping and extending that, uh, that necessary gentleness as much as possible towards everyone in your vicinity. We are all doing our best. And right now doing your best is synonymous with doing a great job, whether or not it's actually yielding its normal results. In this episode, I'm continuing with my conversations about mentorship and this is a juicy one. So let's get right to it. [Theme Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans].
- Hannah McGregor: [00:01:51](#) Lily Cho is an associate professor of English and an Associate Dean, Global and Community Engagement in the faculty of Liberal Arts and Professional Studies at York University. She's also a regular contributor to the feminist academic blog Hook & Eye. She's been coping with the pandemic by reading a lot of young adult novels. [Lily's Theme Music: "Just One of the Guys" by Jenny Lewis].
- Lily Cho: [00:02:25](#) Hi Hannah, how are you?
- Hannah McGregor: [00:02:26](#) Oh, I'm really well. Thanks. How are you?

Lily Cho: [00:02:28](#) So nice to talk to you.

Hannah McGregor: [00:02:30](#) That's the first time somebody has asked me how I am and I've said "well" in ages. I think I'm just really delighted to be talking to you.

Lily Cho: [00:02:41](#) Heart motions.

Hannah McGregor: [00:02:41](#) It's mostly people are like, "how are you?" And I'm like, "HARROWED by life".

Lily Cho: [00:02:45](#) Yeah, yep. Sort of co — joining the collective fetal position. [Laughs] Yes.

Hannah McGregor: [00:02:51](#) Yeah. I like that image of a collective fetal position.

Lily Cho: [00:02:54](#) More than once I've I've written emails, formal emails that said "let's not this because the collegium is already in a collective fetal position and anything more [Laughs] will mean they'll never emerge" [Laughs].

Hannah McGregor: [00:03:09](#) [Laughs].

Lily Cho: [00:03:09](#) I've actually written that line more than once since September started. [Laughs].

Hannah McGregor: [00:03:14](#) [Laughs].

Lily Cho: [00:03:14](#) I was like, we can't, they can't take anymore. Like we can't, can't, can't put anything more on them. [Laughs] No more information. No more webinars. They can't. No more. [Laughs].

Hannah McGregor: [00:03:26](#) Oh my God. No more webinars. I can't —I love the idea of you needing to have like a keyboard shortcut for collective fetal position. Like at this point you use it so often.

Lily Cho: [00:03:35](#) That's a good point. Yeah. I need to work on that. Uh, hi. Nice to see you.

Hannah McGregor: [00:03:40](#) Hi! It's nice to see you too. So, I invited you on specifically to talk about mentorship. So the conversation can take us in whatever directions we would like the conversation to take us in. But this is sort of the question I'm, I'm trying to grapple with right now is: what does it look like to be a feminist mentor? Is my, is my big question. It's a great big question. And I've found really good writing on it and I— we've had discussions about it and you have written on it. And it is also I think [Laughs] an

opportunity to reflect on our own experiences of being mentored as well as sort of what we have learned from those experiences and what we were trying to take forward into our own practice as mentors. And so I'd like to start, if we can, with talking a little bit about sort of your experience of mentorship. To what degree did you experience something that felt or looked like mentorship for you as you sort of came up through academia and what was that mentorship like?

Lily Cho:

[00:04:47](#)

Oh, thanks Hannah. It's such a, I mean, it's such a good question because I, I would not be here or talking to you if it were not for intense mentorship relationships that I think I may only even have understood as mentorship relationships after the fact. So I think one of—when I think about it, I think one of the first things that I, that struck me was that mentorship isn't always what I think it looks like. And that sometimes you only see the effect of it after it has happened. [Laughs] That there's some of that. I mean, I, I, I knew less than nothing about the academy when I started so probably like a lot of people out there listening, you know, no one —my parents didn't go to university. I didn't know what it was and I had no idea what I was doing. And so, you know, I had a lot of luck in terms of people saying something to me or encouraging me. And there are a couple of specific instances for me. And, you know, one of them of course, was the encouragement to apply to graduate school at all. I didn't know it existed at all. I had no idea. I didn't know what the word Master's degree or PhD — not only did I not know what they meant, they weren't in my lexicon at all as a, as a university student. And so even that, you know, when I think about that, that was such a big thing. And it wasn't just one person —and this was the other thing that I think a lot about now. You know, there was, uh, a community. I mean, it wasn't just one professor or one person who took me aside. I mean, there are there, there were some really key folks, but I, I, for me really do think more about how it took a lot of people to sort of nudge me along. Because the thing of course about entering a world that you don't know anything about is, you know, that you you've never believed the first nudge. [Laughs] Like, I don't know, it's not like, you know, you just don't believe it. Like somebody says, "Hey, you're really good at this thing. You should think about applying for grad school." And I don't know about you, but probably I needed to hear that a bunch of times before I took it seriously. But when I can say was, I knew that I was really hungry for something, you know, I knew that the world was bigger than what I grew up with. And so I knew, I knew there were lots of things that I just —were just a mystery to me, [Laughs] so that I think, you know, my first main

experience of mentorship as a, as an academic, was one of realizing that I was a recalcitrant mentee.

- Hannah McGregor: [00:07:40](#) Mmmm. [Laughs].
- Lily Cho: [00:07:40](#) You know? That I didn't, you know, I didn't see myself in any of those rooms and in those people's eyes. And I remember one of my mentors saying, "the profession needs you". And I just had no idea, like what they meant. [Laughs] I was like, "what do you mean? Nobody needs me. And like, there's a profession?"
- Hannah McGregor: [00:08:01](#) [Laughs].
- Lily Cho: [00:08:01](#) Like that didn't occur to me at all. [Laugh] It stayed with me, like I was like afterwards, I thought a lot about that. And then later when I had graduate students myself to think about what it would mean to say that. And so, yeah, that, I mean, I didn't necessarily take well to mentoring I would say. I, I didn't think I was deserving of it probably if I was to be really honest, although I wouldn't have said it at the time. At the time I think I would have said that people didn't understand me or were misreading me.
- Hannah McGregor: [00:08:31](#) Mmmm.
- Lily Cho: [00:08:31](#) My big ambition in life was to be a receptionist.
- Hannah McGregor: [00:08:35](#) Mmmm. Yep.
- Lily Cho: [00:08:35](#) You know, like I, you know, I wanted a job where I didn't have to work in a factory like my mom did, you know? But it never occurred to me to want anything that felt like so far away.
- Hannah McGregor: [00:08:49](#) I love the idea of being a recalcitrant mentee. Right. It suggests the difference between mentoring, those who sort of already see a place for themselves in the institution and sort of what that involves in terms of, you know, helping people to navigate like "I'll write letters of reference for you, I'll help you revise your CV." Like that's a particular kind of mentorship versus the kind of mentorship that's like, "I see you in a way you do not see yourself and I'm going to try to help you shift your understanding of yourself in relationship to this institution." I mean, that sounds harder. [Laughs]
- Lily Cho: [00:09:29](#) [Laughs] It's not a conscious project that I go through at all ---
- Hannah McGregor: [00:09:32](#) [Laughs] Of course!

Lily Cho: [00:09:32](#) -- But I do, but I do recognize that that's what happened to me, for sure. That's one of the things that I love so much about where I teach now is that the majority of my students are first generation students. The vast majority are, uh, students who identify as BIPOC you know, and who do not see themselves in my place necessarily [Laughs]. You know, like it's not a natural assumption that they would go off to grad school or even anything. And for me, it's such a gift to meet people who are like 18, 19, 20, and who think that grownups are really figured out.

Hannah McGregor: [00:10:18](#) [Laughs].

Lily Cho: [00:10:18](#) And just to say "no, no, like really not figured out." And, and to just say, you know, like "the world is a big place and there's a place for you in it." You know, I think undergraduates —I think a lot about undergraduates. I mean, I think about grad students too, and I have many, a few, but for, especially for undergraduates, it's just, I just, they're so scared.

Hannah McGregor: [00:10:38](#) Mmm-hmm.

Lily Cho: [00:10:38](#) And I just, you know, and I understand the anxiety and I just want to, you know, like, I feel like my job is to say, you know, "it's actually gonna like really, I really believe it's going to be okay." You know --

Hannah McGregor: [00:10:49](#) Yeah.

Lily Cho: [00:10:49](#) --And you have to follow your nose a little bit and I'm going to nudge you, [Laughs] you know? And I'm going to say some things and then you're not going to listen to me. And that's fine, you know, because I actually know that that's what happens. Because that happened to me where people said things to me and I didn't listen to them. And I'm like, "you're crazy". Or I'm just not listening I'm not going to do the thing you told me to do.

Hannah McGregor: [00:11:11](#) Do you feel like your own, like memories of being that, that recalcitrant mentee help you when you were talking to 18 and 19 year olds who like, are, are not necessarily sort of hearing what you're saying the first time?

Lily Cho: [00:11:26](#) Yes, yes it does. And it also helps me understand my relationship to the idea of mentoring and what I want from it. Which is one that is, I think indirect. I think there's this kind of presumption in a lot of discussions around mentorship that

there's a kind of one to one causal relationship that may be vaguely maternal and paternal and or parental, I guess, which I always resist. Uh, always, always I find that not at all a path that I am interested in [Laughs]. Or even friendship, like I don't think of friendship as a form of mentorship either. Like I am actually a little bit removed in that way. I think that some — I think for me, some of the more painful experiences of being a graduate student or, or just someone who was less secure was the collapsing of friendship and professional relationships in ways that were often not helpful for me. [Laughs] And so for me, I'm actually quite, I try to be quite firm actually about those lines. And then I say, I say to a lot of junior scholars, like I said, you know, you don't really want me necessarily be your friend cuz I can't write for your tenure file.

- Hannah McGregor: [00:12:45](#) Yeah.
- Lily Cho: [00:12:45](#) Right?
- Hannah McGregor: [00:12:46](#) Yeah!
- Lily Cho: [00:12:46](#) Like, you know, I'm like, there are only so many Asian Canadian women in this rank and at some point you're going to need a letter and they're only gonna be so many specialists. Like we can count them on, on like maybe two hands now, but it was one hand, not that long ago. [Laughs] You know? Like there aren't that many choices. So you want to keep me alive as a choice. [Laughs].
- Hannah McGregor: [00:13:11](#) [Laughs].
- Lily Cho: [00:13:11](#) And interestingly, keeping me alive as a choice, as someone who will champion your career really means actually keeping me a little bit arm's length, right? Or a lot arm's length.
- Hannah McGregor: [00:13:20](#) That's such an interesting articulation of how boundaries work in these relationships. Like that more closest is not always better for all kinds of reasons, including these very functional reasons. Like I can help you if we are not friends.
- Lily Cho: [00:13:36](#) Yeah. Like if we do not go for drinks, I can do more for you. Like trust me, you know? And I actually have said that, you know, a few times, and I think that in the last while — in the last few years, maybe 10 years? I don't know. I've been rethinking ideas of intimacy. And I've read, I read a book on intimacy by Adam Phillips and Leo Bersani called *Intimacies*. And I, to be honest,

can't tell you what happened in the last three chapters. But— and the book is only four chapters long [Laughs] -

Hannah McGregor: [00:14:08](#) [Laughs].

Lily Cho: [00:14:08](#) - but the opening pages really struck me because — and I'm probably going to paraphrase it wrong, but it says something like, you know, we've been told that intimacy functions along a kind of post-Freudian model where you spit out and vomit out all your closest historical gunk. And then somehow putting that all out there in front of somebody as a way to bring them closer. But what if like there was a different model of intimacy that wasn't about performing the trauma of the past? What if there was a different kind of intimacy that is built on actual remove. Like on actual forms of distance. And I actually, you know, I think about that. Like I think about it in my teaching. I think about that when I work with students -

Hannah McGregor: [00:14:56](#) Yeah.

Lily Cho: [00:14:56](#) - and I know that desire, like I was a student who for most of my career, all of my career as a student, I had difficult family relationships and I longed, you know, longed for an adult figure to supplant, you know, what I thought was messed up kinship relations. [Laughs] And in fact, what I would say was the, probably one of the greatest mentorship gifts, you know, were those really clear boundaries that people who looked after me took on, like they just said, you know, you you're going to be okay, these are the things I should focus on, you know? And, and, and it may have seemed cold at the time, but in fact it was really useful. And I think a lot of that now in the age of hashtag #metoo, where there is so much blurring of the boundary around what it means to be close to someone who you have power over -

Hannah McGregor: [00:15:50](#) Mmm-hmm.

Lily Cho: [00:15:50](#) - and I think, you know, asking someone to be close to you as a way of saying that you're going to help them is so wrong, actually [Laughs] in so many — so often it can so often be so wrong -

Hannah McGregor: [00:16:03](#) Yep.

Lily Cho: [00:16:03](#) - that we should never mistake, proximity and closeness with genuine care for that person's career and work.

Hannah McGregor: [00:16:12](#) You're making me think of so many interactions I've had with students where, you know, a student who sort of goes AWOL halfway through the semester. And then, you know, you're trying to, you're trying to get them back. You're trying to get them back into class so that they don't disappear. And so many of those students have very clearly believed that I expected a disclosure from them -

Lily Cho: [00:16:38](#) Yep.

Hannah McGregor: [00:16:38](#) - like a justification. Like here, I'll tell — I'm going to tell you about the terrible thing that has been happening. Because you have said, you want me to come and talk to you. And so you must mean that I owe you this disclosure. And I'm like, "Oh, wow, wow, no." Like, if you want to tell me, you can, but like, I actually have no desire to know anything that's happening in your private life.

Lily Cho: [00:16:59](#) I mean, I'm even more hardcore. I interrupt and say "I don't want to know." [Laughs]

Hannah McGregor: [00:17:03](#) It's like you actually can't tell me. But it's like, I want to help you. Like, I want us to figure out a way we can like reweight the assignments in the class so that you can still pass at this point. I, like, I just trust you. You told me you couldn't do it -

Lily Cho: [00:17:17](#) Absolutely.

Hannah McGregor: [00:17:17](#) - I trust you. Don't tell me why. You're a person. I believe you.

Lily Cho: [00:17:22](#) I don't even know — yeah, absolutely. And I really, I mean, and I think that it was more intense when I first started as a professor when I was first hired. You know, I don't think that there had been a younger professor hired in the department where I was hired in for a long time. And, you know, I was a younger woman, a woman of colour. And I found office hours, like most like most POC scholars, just so intense -

Hannah McGregor: [00:17:46](#) Yeah.

Lily Cho: [00:17:46](#) - because suddenly people were coming with so much stuff and I very quickly became really hardcore about boundaries.

Hannah McGregor: [00:17:57](#) Yeah.

Lily Cho: [00:17:57](#) You know, I'm not that person. I'm not that I'm not the open ear. You know, I can direct you to the right resources, you know,

and there is a structure and a container for those disclosures. But my office actually isn't it. [Laughs] And the kindest thing I can do is to actually not listen in that moment, in fact, because that's actually not what I'm — it's not what that person actually needs me for, even though they may not know it. And I know that sounds really mean, but [Laughs] — and I say it in the nicest way I can, but I, I don't —and I don't want the performance of trauma.

Hannah McGregor: [00:18:33](#) Yeah.

Lily Cho: [00:18:33](#) I don't want to invite it. I don't want people to have to live it. It's not for me as someone who I think has lived through some trauma too. Like, I don't, I don't want to make anyone else do it [Laughs] you know? I'm like, yeah —and like, again, like if we go back to hashtag #metoo, you know, of course one of the really important lessons is just like: I believe you. Like, you don't have to say too much.

Hannah McGregor: [00:18:56](#) Yeah.

Lily Cho: [00:18:56](#) Like I just, I believe that you need something. Here are the ways that I can help, you know? And here are the ways I can't help. And this is where you go for that other stuff [Laughs]. But, but yeah, so, so interestingly for me, mentorship can seem quite distant.

Hannah McGregor: [00:19:11](#) And structured, which is structured and boundaried, which is so healthy in this institution where we have so few —like there's so many rules, but so few boundaries in academia. In this way that's so, so messy and so dangerous. I was, I was chatting with a friend who's a high school teacher the other day and she was talking about like, you know, the rules around interactions with students, which are so strict because you were teaching minors. And so like, you, you are not allowed to touch your students. And I was just, I just had this moment where I was like, the fact that overnight students go from relationships with adults who are not allowed to touch them, like, can't hug them to like the next fall you are now being taught by adults who could have sex with you.

Lily Cho: [00:20:04](#) Hopefully not [Laughs].

Hannah McGregor: [00:20:05](#) I mean, shouldn't. Like, absolutely shouldn't. But there's no, there's no professional — like there's no -

Lily Cho: [00:20:11](#) No, I hear you. It's true. Even if we take the sex out of it. I'm sorry to have to take the sex out of anything.

Hannah McGregor: [00:20:19](#) [Laughs].

Lily Cho: [00:20:19](#) But even if we take that, if we just take a —what I think of as a fairly standard thing, which is the end of class party, which, you know, or taking the class out for drinks. I mean, how often in the academy have we seen that be a site of real danger for one thing [Laughs] in so many different directions. And, you know, and I like, navigating that is incredibly complicated and I'm not saying people shouldn't do it. I mean, and I've certainly done it too, but I, over the years have certainly become, you know, more careful.

Hannah McGregor: [00:20:55](#) Yeah.

Lily Cho: [00:20:55](#) For self —when I say self-protection, I don't even mean like around accusations. I just mean around the kind of energy that you can pour into situations that are miss—again, that I think of as mistaken. I think that sometimes there's a desire for friendship or like a kind of social relationship, which is actually a desire for mentorship. And I think that those two actually need to be separated.

Hannah McGregor: [00:21:19](#) Mmmm. It's so interesting for me to sort of look back on what my own desires were as a student, particularly as an undergraduate student where, you know, I had a dead mother and an emotionally distant father, and all I wanted was an adult to pay attention to me. Like I just desperately wanted surrogate parents who thought I was interesting and wanted to spend time with me. And so I was very, very drawn to those professors who had poor boundaries around their relationships with students. And that now in retrospect, I look back at and really admire the ones who actually had very clear, stated articulated boundaries that were like, I will do this for you. And I will not do anything else. And we are not friends, and this is how this works. And that, that is much more what I've modeled in my own mentorship. Like, I couldn't be less interested in being like friends with, or a pseudo mom to my students. Like, it just feels like amongst other things like wildly unhelpful.

Lily Cho: [00:22:25](#) Yes. And 19 kinds of wrong [Laughs].

Hannah McGregor: [00:22:29](#) So many — like would just, I would also just be so bad at it. Like that was just like, I can't help you that way. But like, I am, you

know, pretty good at helping you apply for grad school. So I can do that.

Lily Cho: [00:22:41](#) Yeah. Like I can write an ace reference letter -

Hannah McGregor: [00:22:45](#) Yeah.

Lily Cho: [00:22:45](#) - right? And like, and of course, uh, you know, because I'm where I'm at in my career, like I'm now assisting tenure files and I can say — or I'm helping junior colleagues navigate the tenure process.

Hannah McGregor: [00:22:55](#) Yep.

Lily Cho: [00:22:55](#) I can say with great credibility as the former co-chair of the university senate committee, I have read and assessed and voted on over 200 tenure promotion files. You know, I know what a good file looks like -

Hannah McGregor: [00:23:08](#) Yep.

Lily Cho: [00:23:08](#) - because I did all the work. Right. I read all of them and I engaged in discussions about them. And I can take that credibility and bring it to your file. But for me to have that credibility means that we don't actually ever go for drinks. [Laughs].

Hannah McGregor: [00:23:25](#) Yeah.

Lily Cho: [00:23:25](#) Right? Like we don't actually hang out because I can tell you, you know, this is the season in the fall where I get asked to do letters and for tenure and promotion, you know, the first question is, you know, are you at arm's length from the candidate? You have to be able to say, yeah, definitely. [Laughs].

Hannah McGregor: [00:23:45](#) Yes.

Lily Cho: [00:23:45](#) You have to be able to say that. And it's, you know, it's, it's a thing I think about a lot.

Hannah McGregor: [00:23:51](#) Yeah. Okay. I waylaid us by, by bringing -

Lily Cho: [00:23:55](#) Oh yeah sorry.

Hannah McGregor: [00:23:55](#) - inappropriate relationships with undergraduates into the conversation, but I want to return for a moment to that, like

your description of being a brand new faculty member and very, very quickly sort of getting hit by this massive expectation of, of emotional labor by virtue of being a young woman of color and what it has looked like for you to start — like, how early do you feel like you started to sort of think of yourself as somebody who is taking on mentorship? Was that something that it felt right away? Like, oh, this is something I'm going to have to do, so time to sort of figure out what this looks like for me? Or was that something that sort of developed over time as you, as you moved through your career?

- Lily Cho: [00:24:42](#) That's an interesting question. Uh, I guess I would answer that two ways or in two steps. The first one, I think back on it —and again, this makes me sound so unfriendly [Laughs] but -
- Hannah McGregor: [00:24:55](#) I love all of this. Like I am so on board for conversations about boundaries and limits -
- Lily Cho: [00:25:01](#) - yeah.
- Hannah McGregor: [00:25:01](#) - like the expectations that, like what it looks like to be a feminist mentor is just to be like, I invite everybody to my home on Sunday -
- Lily Cho: [00:25:10](#) - And we have tea. Yeah. No.
- Hannah McGregor: [00:25:12](#) And I hug them all the time— like I just. That, that does not work for me. It's like, and it's, I think it surprises people. Cause I make this podcast that really gives a lot of strangers. The impression that I am like really into a form of intimacy that's about disclosure. And that is like not, not actually —despite the fact that I make this podcast, like not actually the way that I want most of my professional relationships to look. And that it's tricky to navigate.
- Lily Cho: [00:25:42](#) That's such a good point. And I'm going to answer that question, but I also want to say something about that because it seems— like I, I have been teaching online, fully online for a couple of years and all my lectures are via podcast and I realized that I could be way more intimate in the podcast with my students and in the construct —and the way I structured my lectures. I can say way more and tell them way more when I'm not in front of them. And that there's a container for it. Like the podcast is the container where I am really close to you. And it's a very intimate format. I'm in your head, I'm talking to you. And you're like, you know, in your house or whatever. And it is —has been very important for me in that teacher relationship to say, you

know, the person I am in the lecture is, is this, but it doesn't mean that I'm also that outside of the lecture, like it's actually, the lecture is the container for that intimacy. And it's the boundary [Laughs]. You know, when, when that MP4 clicks finish, you know, we're — that's, that's the end. [Laughs].

Hannah McGregor: [00:26:41](#) [Laughs].

Lily Cho: [00:26:41](#) You know, and it can continue in the form of a professional relationship, but yeah —but to go back to, to realizing when I would be a mentor. So I guess the first thing I would say is realizing through the form of negation in the sense that fairly early on, I had students asking me to supervise their doctoral work or their thesis work and me saying no. And I —and me explaining that actually that the nicest thing I could do for them was to say no. That I was actually too junior and that it wouldn't serve them to have me. And so in that, and for me, that was really, you know, it was partly about protecting myself, but it was really also about that candidate, uh, that person to say, you know, like I know, you know, you think that we're going to be super connected and that my work is going to align with yours and all of that. And I said, "No, I can be a committee member. I can get reader." But that supervisor-supervisee relationship does involves certain currents of institutional capital. And you actually need somebody more senior because that's the structure that we work in.

Hannah McGregor: [00:27:46](#) Yep.

Lily Cho: [00:27:46](#) And I, and I think so, so there was a bit of negation. I think that in terms of all the students who were coming to my office and whatnot, again, I think that, you know, when I think back to that time, one of the most important things that I remember saying to myself was that the best form of mentorship —but I didn't say it that way. I, I never said, "Oh, I could be a great mentor". That was never the language [Laughs]. But that the best thing I could do for this student actually was to not invite this intimacy. And so again, like, I guess I'm thematically consistent, or I sound a bit repetitive, but, but it was true that I think that when you, especially when you're younger and you are a person of color where — in a place where there haven't been a lot of people of color in that position, you, you know, there's all this hunger for connection, which I am happy to provide in the form of the teaching relationship [Laughs]. That's what I'm there for. But, but in fact, I think, you know, without really articulating it that way, I think that all those students who came through my door, my office door may or may not have —at least what I was trying to teach in that moment were boundaries, you know, were

ways of identifying limits and identifying roles and institutional relationships. And to say, you know, in fact, these relationships are really important. The institution has these articulated roles and hierarchies. Let's recognize them for what they are. Let's not pretend to break them down. Let's not pretend to be pals [Laughs]. And, and especially, you know, when I started I was 27, I think when I started as a prof.

Hannah McGregor: [00:29:30](#)

Yeah.

Lily Cho: [00:29:30](#)

And so I wasn't actually that much older than some of my students.

Hannah McGregor: [00:29:34](#)

Yep.

Lily Cho: [00:29:34](#)

In fact, some of them were older than me, [Laughs] especially at the graduate level. And so it was actually, I guess, really important also to say, you know, to have again, that limit. So I think mentorship as a form of, of articulating, uh, maintaining limits and boundaries is something that it is deeply feminist, I think.

Hannah McGregor: [00:29:55](#)

Mmm-hmm. Yeah. Boundaries are deeply feminist. Incredibly important. Hearing you describe sort of your own mentoring students by helping them understand that boundaries matter makes me wonder if that was sort of something you experienced being taught yourself, or something that you had to like figure out for yourself. Like, do you remember people saying, like -

Lily Cho: [00:30:20](#)

Yeah.

Hannah McGregor: [00:30:20](#)

-do you remember people doing that to you? Saying like, you know, here's, here's the boundary, here's how I'm going to sort of frame our relationship such that it will be healthy and productive.

Lily Cho: [00:30:32](#)

Right. I don't recall like a kind of signal moment where that happened. I think instead what I do recall were definitely moments where like, I might be going through a personal crisis or something, and the academic mentor didn't really want to talk about that. And I guess that was a limiting action. So it wasn't as harsh, so maybe I'm harsher [Laughs] -

Hannah McGregor: [00:30:59](#)

[Laughs].

Lily Cho: [00:30:59](#) - but it certainly wasn't recalibrating or steering me away. You know, like, let's go back to the reading, let's go back to the text, let's go back to your program and what we're talking about in terms of what your chapters are. And then I think there is a really important moment for all of the really significant mentorship relationships of breakdown. Like I do think that there is a, there is a moment where there'll be a kind of —again, not to be overly psychoanalytical about it, but I think there is actually a moment of disidentification. A period of it. Right? I do think that. And again, I sound — I don't want to be hypocritical because on the one hand I'm saying, "don't drag anyone into this parental relationship" [Laughs], but there is, you know, I think there is an important process of saying — like I'm like, "I'm not that. I'm different [Laughs]. I don't — I think that for me also, I guess I don't want to name names, but I think when I was a graduate student in the time when I was a graduate student in the United States, there was a very famous -

Hannah McGregor: [00:32:07](#) [Laughs].

Lily Cho: [00:32:07](#) - or, or she was famous to me [Laughs] professor who wrote you know a book that really mattered to me and who you know I looked up to and whatnot, like from afar. She didn't know existed. But I remember going to a conference once these big, scary US conferences, and I saw her from afar, and then I saw a group of women who looked eerily like her.

Hannah McGregor: [00:32:35](#) Oh-ho!

Lily Cho: [00:32:35](#) And I found out we were all graduate students. And they dressed a lot like her and seemed to move a lot like her. And then I found out they all worked out in the same gym and the idea of working out in a gym back at that time seemed really weird to me. Cuz this was a long time ago [Laughs]. And I remember being super creeped out. Like I remember thinking, Oh, well, I don't want that. I don't want that at all. I don't want to be a pale shadow of a person who is a luminary. [Laughs] Like that didn't seem appealing at all. Even though there was an air, an effect around those women. I remember they really awed me. Like if they, they clearly look like they had been chosen to be part of this group. And then if you recall how weird and scary it is to be a graduate student at your first or second or third big conference, you know, you just, you would love to be part of a group. Like you'd be to part of a group where you have this automatic belonging and automatically someone's going to have lunch with you and automatically at break, you know, there'll be some other person.

Hannah McGregor: [00:33:35](#) Yeah.

Lily Cho: [00:33:35](#) So you're never like sitting by yourself, reading the conference program on a bench [Laughs]. Like -

Hannah McGregor: [00:33:42](#) Which is like almost all I've done at every American conference I've been to.

Lily Cho: [00:33:47](#) I see the appeal. Like I really did! [Laughs] And yet I was like deep in my core horrified and terrified by it. So I think maybe that also shaped something about how I saw that, like — at least the supervisor-supervisee relationship, which I think sometimes gets mapped onto a mentorship relationship.

Hannah McGregor: [00:34:10](#) That has an expectation of mentorship built into it, even though it is not identical.

Lily Cho: [00:34:16](#) Yep.

Hannah McGregor: [00:34:16](#) So there's sort of a Venn diagram, but, but they are not quite the same thing, are they? And, and for me, for, for sure, a lot of the mentors that I look back on and realize were most formative are ones that I didn't necessarily have that kind of formal relationship with, but people who just, you know, took it upon themselves to teach me things I needed to know.

Lily Cho: [00:34:36](#) Yeah, absolutely. And I actually now, think that my students are most successful when they're not like me. You know, I don't want them to ever replicate me, you know? And I, I, I, I'm pretty sure, I'm pretty sure I've said this to all my grad students, if you're my grad student, you're listening and if I haven't said it to you, I'm saying it to you now, you know [Laughs]. Like, I want you to not be me. For your work to speak different. Like the whole point is that you're at the cutting edge of your thing and your idea, and you're innovating. And so it shouldn't look like what I've done at all.

Hannah McGregor: [00:35:09](#) No.

Lily Cho: [00:35:09](#) It should sound different. It should be different. It should be you, but it like, it should be new. And how horrible would it be to have to write like your supervisor. Blah. [Laughs]

Hannah McGregor: [00:35:22](#) [Laughs] But that takes, that takes a different kind of skill as well as a, as a supervisor, as an editor, as a teacher to, to learn how to teach people in a way that is not about replicating you and the way you do things. To help people make their work the best

it can be while not making it more like your work. Like that's a, that's a different skillset.

- Lily Cho: [00:35:46](#) I guess so. And I do want to give some credit to my own doctoral supervisory committee in this, because I think now I am considered a scholar of Asian Canadian literature and culture and diaspora — those fields weren't really established when I was in graduate school. They were, they were there, but they were fairly new. And I don't think anybody on my committee would have claimed to have been an expert in any of those fields at all. And so what I am grateful for is the kind of supervision they offered to me, which, you know, took on the form of rigorous reading and engaged reading. But, you know, they never wanted me to sound like them because they didn't do the thing I did [Laughs]. So there was that, that performance of mastery wasn't built into how I came into the academy in some ways, just because the field hadn't fully sort of formed yet. And, and, and of course now what I would say to any young academic is no field is really formed [Laughs]. And so don't, don't replicate what's been done or don't sound like what's happened. I don't know. I mean, maybe there are people authorizing figures, you know, who want that, but I don't think you'll feel good about it.
- Hannah McGregor: [00:37:01](#) [Laughs] I mean, you probably shouldn't. I, I suspect it is a thing in academia if for no other reason, then I read so many people who write in exactly the same way. And you're like, well, at some point somebody is teaching you to write like that, right?
- Lily Cho: [00:37:16](#) Yeah.
- Hannah McGregor: [00:37:16](#) So it might, it might just be more the sort of interpolating force of a discipline -
- Lily Cho: [00:37:21](#) Yes.
- Hannah McGregor: [00:37:21](#) - and the way that you read in a discipline and you learn how to write like that. And then you produce work that sounds like the work that you've read more than somebody like an authority figure being like, "You did it wrong. Your sentences need to have 17 more clauses."
- Lily Cho: [00:37:34](#) Right, right. No, it's never that clear, I think.
- Hannah McGregor: [00:37:37](#) Yeah.

Lily Cho: [00:37:37](#) But it's true that like, I mean, you know, the academy does have a certain kind of rhythm and flow to academic writing.

Hannah McGregor: [00:37:43](#) Yep.

Lily Cho: [00:37:43](#) And, and I value that for what it is. But it's hard to figure how to articulate yourself within that genre in that form. So, absolutely. Absolutely.

Hannah McGregor: [00:37:55](#) Yeah. And just one, one version of the ways in which you are always trying to articulate yourself within the sort of larger genres and forms of the institution, right. That there are all of these, these sort of limitations and expectations and, and you are, you are working within those to try to do something that is, that is your own. I am really — I know, I know that you prefaced it by saying you didn't want to over-psychoanalyze these relationships, but I am struck by how useful the idea of disidentification is for conversations I know sort of you and I have had in the past about the complex business of our relationships to sort of our feminist foremothers. And what it means to look back at the feminists who came before us and see them sort of saying and doing things that we find troubling or objectionable. You know, certainly these conversations came out a huge amount around the #metoo movement as a lot of feminists of previous generations were like, "This is outrageous. You're pretending everything is rape."

Lily Cho: [00:38:58](#) Absolutely.

Hannah McGregor: [00:38:58](#) What felt in a lot of ways like a generational divide around conversations around sex and consent. And, you know, disidentification seems at least to offer a possibility for thinking about the way that we distance ourselves or turn away from the ideas of the people who were so formative for us without being like, "And now time for you to go into the trash bin of history."

Lily Cho: [00:39:21](#) Yeah, absolutely. And, and, you know, I mean, that's such a good point. I mean, I was just thinking last — I was just rereading over the latest iteration of all of the really painful public letter writing around trans lives and, uh, you know, authors whose work I like and admire who, you know, put their names on things where I think, "Why? Why, why, why, why are you doing this? [Laughs]

Hannah McGregor: [00:39:47](#) Is this — were you a big Tom Stoppard fan? Is that what you were? [Laughs]

Lily Cho: [00:39:52](#) [Laughs] I can't even go there.

Hannah McGregor: [00:39:57](#) [Laughs].

Lily Cho: [00:39:57](#) But I will say — to get back to your question about disidentification. Yeah. I think that, first of all, I want to acknowledge the pain of that moment for all parties involved. So I do think it is, has been, and will continue to be painful. Like nobody said disidentification wasn't a knife, you know, into your intellectual heart. [Laughs] You know, I mean, it's, it's tough. And I don't— so I don't think of it lightly at all. But I do think it is a useful frame for thinking about how to understand these differences. Because the desire is to go to the language of betrayal. I think there is a lot of desire for that. And certainly I feel it like I'm like, "How could you say that? I love you." Like, you know, you don't know me, but I love you. And now I feel like you've broken my heart and I didn't even get a chance to say hi. [Laughs] So -

Hannah McGregor: [00:40:57](#) [Laughs].

Lily Cho: [00:40:57](#) - like I never even shook her hand at a book signing. [Laughs] So that feeling I think is really, is to be acknowledged and held for a moment for what it is. But I think then let go of because it's misplaced and I don't think it is betrayal. I think it is about a different pain, which is what I think of as disidentification, which you will go through with, you know, many of the more powerful figures in your life, right. Where you will have a moment of intense distancing. And, and that, for me, it helps because there's another side, there is another side to disidentification. We know this, you know, and we, don't always— that other side is different depending on the relationship, but there is another side to it. And it also takes it out of a kind of that sort of more personal frame and to thinking of it more —because when I talk about disidentification I'm also thinking about it as institutional disidentification. So less around personal stuff, I think all of that's mixed into it, but around, you know, when I think about some of the conversations you and I have had —like how to be a senior academic and the world that we're in, and then what happens if the senior academic who's life we've really just taken on as, as, as, as shiny [Laughs] becomes less shiny, how do we deal with that? And I think knowing that that's an institutionally structured relationship, and then to actually take refuge in that primary function of your intellectual life, which is to innovate and to keep helping yourself and the people, your readers and your, and your fellow thinkers think differently, to understand that actually, this is part of that process, right. That, that in fact, you know, that distancing is painful, but it's also a really

important part of your continuing emergence as an intellectual force.

- Hannah McGregor: [00:43:01](#) Is that what it's supposed to be doing? [Laughs].
- Lily Cho: [00:43:03](#) Yes, you do do that. You don't know you do that. But you do.
- Hannah McGregor: [00:43:06](#) [Laughs].
- Lily Cho: [00:43:06](#) Every day, right? Every day you're doing something and you're changing, you know, a little bit how the world thinks about the world, right.
- Hannah McGregor: [00:43:12](#) Yeah.
- Lily Cho: [00:43:12](#) That's what we do. And we have to keep doing it. And you can't do it by doing it exactly the same way as the people before us did it.
- Hannah McGregor: [00:43:21](#) No. No. The sort of very business of what we do as intellectuals is about sort of iteration and remediation. And so it's always by definition, it's always a sort of shifting dialogue.
- Lily Cho: [00:43:32](#) Yeah. And I would say if disidentification helps shift also what had been a pseudo filial relationship, that's a good thing. It shouldn't have been that. So [Laughs] so that's what, that's, what happens if that's what it takes to shift that, you know—and again, like I, you know, I think about people I know who had very filial relationships with their supervisors, well into the supervisors old age and whatnot. And on the one hand that was extremely beautiful. But on the other hand, I personally found it deeply disturbing. So again, like, I, you know, it was, I was, I thought this is, this is not why queer studies rearticulated kinship for us.
- Hannah McGregor: [00:44:14](#) Yeah. Well said.
- Lily Cho: [00:44:14](#) I know it sounds really harsh. [Laughs]
- Hannah McGregor: [00:44:16](#) No it doesn't. It sounds like a reminder that disidentification can be part of the helpful process of building boundaries. Which is part of, part of, for me, at least part of the business of becoming an adult has been figuring out how to build boundaries for myself, that, that make a life livable. I keep thinking, as we've been having this conversation around sort of the way that that boundaries and distance can be their own form of care, I keep thinking about this audio essay that Xine Yao did sort of towards

the beginning of the pandemic about masks and how sort of masks as a, as a gesture of communal care reshape our thinking about, about intimacy and trustworthiness in particular. And sort of, you know, particularly she's thinking about how masks have been a signal of untrustworthiness and the racialization of mask wearing and how that, that dialogue is shifting in the context of the pandemic. But it's such a powerful image of like, in fact, here is a boundary that is meant to keep my whole community safer and that a lot of the time boundaries are the thing that keeps us safer together.

- Lily Cho: [00:45:25](#) That's so lovely. I hadn't actually made that connection and I love it [Laughs]. And I love it. I just think that's so apt and so spot on. And that the things that do seem to distance us from people can actually be the things that are about protecting the vulnerable. Right. And we see it over and over again, you know, in very messed up mentorship relationships where there wasn't that protection through distancing. And so, yeah. Yeah. I think that's a really, really beautiful and an apt connection.
- Hannah McGregor: [00:46:01](#) Is there anything that you were hoping I would ask about, or that you wanted to say that has not come up?
- Lily Cho: [00:46:08](#) I mean, we haven't really talked about administrative work, which, you know, is neither here nor there. [Laughs].
- Hannah McGregor: [00:46:13](#) [Laughs].
- Lily Cho: [00:46:13](#) I can talk about it. I don't have to. I just remember it being in the list of things that you mapped out. [Laughs].
- Hannah McGregor: [00:46:17](#) Yeah. [Laughs]. Would you like to?
- Lily Cho: [00:46:22](#) I guess, you know, what I'll say is that I think university administrators, especially kind of low ranking ones like me [Laughs]. I mean, I shouldn't say low ranking. What I mean is, you know, sorry, I had a cuter way of understanding what the associate dean role is at one point and now I've lost it, but [Laughs] it's such a weird role-
- Hannah McGregor: [00:46:48](#) Cuter!
- Lily Cho: [00:46:48](#) - I often have to explain to students what I do and that it's very confusing. They're like, what do you do? And I'm like, I know it's like not a thing anyone ever thought about. I would just say that one of the things I like most about the administrative work that I do, and one of the reasons why I keep signing up for it was

because there are a surprisingly large number of ways in which I can pursue the agendas of equity and diversity and inclusion in ways that are much harder to do from other positions. And it's not that I always make the right decision at all. But one of the things I think a lot about is how in a lot of meetings where I don't, I don't make the decision, but I'm with people who make decisions. And learning how to speak at those tables and in those rooms, in the interests of the things that I care a lot about has been so important for me as a way of understanding power. And I think that, you know, we tend to think about power or people in upper level positions as a kind of, I don't know how to put it, like direct through line to influence. Like this person — Oh, if a person of colour is promoted to be, you know, this fancy thing, then somehow this will have a cascading effect. And it often does. And in ways that are not obvious sometimes. But I do think that one of the ways in which feminist mentorship emerges and administrative work for me has been around how much I learn in my roles about how the institution works for you, can work for you. You know, so it's not about changing it or changing it from inside or something like that, but, leveraging, learning to leverage, in the interest of the things that you care about, the things that are already there. And if I could just go back to that earlier example of doing a tenure and promotion letter, you know, that language of arm's length assessment has been there since whatever time immemorial. It's always been there and maybe people take it seriously or not seriously, but in fact, it's built into the structure. It's the biggest signal that the institution has to, just to everybody, to say, "These relationships if you want them to work in the way that you think, you know, you actually need that distance." And so that's an example of a thing that's like built into your collective agreement. That's built into your letter that the Dean will write for your external assessor, right. It's built into all of this stuff and it's just taken for granted as the language. But in fact it has real effects. I don't know I could go on, but I think a lot about, and I'm not being very organized about my thinking, but I do think a lot about how to take, you know, what is a pretty stodgy institution and use it.

Hannah McGregor: [00:49:56](#)

It's a different way of thinking about sort of what it means to move into those administrative roles, right. Then rather than being like, you know, the, the goal is to move into this role and use it to break things down from inside. Instead saying like, what you were trying to do is understand the actual architecture of this institution so that you know, how things happen so that you can make the things happen that matter.

Lily Cho: [00:50:28](#)

Yeah. That's —thank you for that. That's exactly it. And in fact, cause it's — I get frustrated about it of course, is that I

sometimes have friends and colleagues who want something done and then they ask for it to be done. And, you know, in, in, in good interests, like in interest of all good things, whenever they might be. And it sometimes frustrates me because the people are sometimes loudest about asking, haven't put in the work to figure out what the ask is [Laughs]. And then I say, if you went to any of those meetings to which you were invited [Laughs] -

- Hannah McGregor: [00:51:01](#) Yeah. Yeah.
- Lily Cho: [00:51:01](#) - It would, it would just frame that ask in a different way. But I do think that, you know, I don't mean to be like all rah-rah institution is great. But there is a lot there -
- Hannah McGregor: [00:51:10](#) [Laughs] Imagine if you were like, you know what I love? The university and all of the ways it works.
- Lily Cho: [00:51:18](#) Yeah. I just I'm so down with it. [Laughs].
- Hannah McGregor: [00:51:22](#) [Laughs].
- Lily Cho: [00:51:22](#) But I think that as someone who, you know, started as an undergrad in a student group, whose name I cringe over and I'm proud of, it was a student group called The Student Organized Resistance Movement. And, you know, we believed in everything that you might believe —associate with a name — a student group name like that [Laughs]. You know, I have moved in my kind of understanding of activism to thinking a lot more about leveraging some of the power structures that are, that— just to get some quicker wins. And for me, those really matter. I just think like we hired 35 people, tenure track people, in my faculty last year. And when I look —across the faculty — and when I look at the list of new hires, like my heart kind of soars because they are a diverse, diverse, interesting group of people. And, and then I think like this, these, the, you know, these are all incremental, but also not incremental, like changing things. But yeah. So, uh, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah.
- Hannah McGregor: [00:52:32](#) [Laughs] Okay, well, those are perfect final words. So we're going to leave it at that [Laughs] blah, blah, blah, blah, blah.
- Lily Cho: [00:52:38](#) Sorry. I'll say one more thing.
- Hannah McGregor: [00:52:39](#) [Laughs].

- Lily Cho: [00:52:39](#) It's something that really, really stayed with me is that a feminist administrator who's now I think provost somewhere once said at, I don't know it was a reception or a party where we were saying goodbye because she was getting promoted somewhere. She said something that really struck me where she said, you know, people used to say that, you know, people go into admin because they can't teach, they can't do research. And this, of course, wasn't true of her cause she's a star [Laughs]. You know, like an amazing teacher and like extraordinary researcher. And then she said, you know, administrative work for me has been a really interesting research problem. Like I think of all the admin work I do as like, I come at it from the perspective of a researcher as well, you know? And I take all that critical thinking, and think, how do we solve this problem? How do I identify the problem? How do we name the problem? How do we get a lit review [Laughs] you know, and say, you know, okay, there are not enough Black professors in the academy. So how do we — what do we do about that? And I think that solving a problem like that does take a kind of academic lens. I mean, not least, cause it is about academics, but you have to think like a researcher to get to the answer.
- Hannah McGregor: [00:53:47](#) Yeah. And you have to think strategically, which is also part of the business of research as well. Right? That you don't, you don't tackle a research problem by trying to answer every question you have simultaneously with a single sort of bulldozer, metaphorical bulldozer, right. That you got to -
- Lily Cho: [00:54:04](#) Right. Well, that's where your committee says the standard thing. Where like, the scope is too big. We want you to narrow the question [Laughs].
- Hannah McGregor: [00:54:11](#) Right. But that, that, like, you've got to pick it apart. You've got to figure out what are the interlocking threads that make up this problem? How am I going to set the scope to something that is realistic? You know, how am I gonna — what can I learn from what's come before? What hasn't worked? Like, these are all of the questions of solving a research problem. And you're totally right. They're also all of the questions of solving an institutional problem.
- Lily Cho: [00:54:31](#) Yeah. That's my little pitch for, you know, all the cool people to come and join the dark side of admin. It's actually more interesting than you think [Laughs]. Your brain doesn't die there.

Hannah McGregor: [00:54:42](#) I believe that. I have my first kind of pseudo administrative roles this year.

Lily Cho: [00:54:47](#) I saw that.

Hannah McGregor: [00:54:47](#) I'm grad— I'm graduate program chair and I'm faculty teaching fellow in my faculty, which is a sort of like reports to the Associate Dean kind of role. And so I'm just beginning to get a taste for what, for what these positions look like. And, and the thing that I am finding, there's lots, lots of things that I am finding really interesting and productive about these roles, including really starting to understand how the university works at a much more meaningful level. And I am also struggling. And this is part of, I think, what inspired wanting to do this series of conversations, but I'm struggling with having people treat me like The Man.

Lily Cho: [00:55:28](#) Oh yeah.

Hannah McGregor: [00:55:29](#) [Laughs].

Lily Cho: [00:55:29](#) Oh, I love it. I love being in a room. And then having all these people saying, "And the Dean won't let us, and the Dean's office" and I'm like, "I'm the Dean!". I'm that. [Laughs].

Hannah McGregor: [00:55:39](#) [Laughs].

Lily Cho: [00:55:39](#) So it's ok. You can keep being angry. But like, actually say it to my face, you know. I'm that person, the person you like, you know, like — yeah. No. it's so interesting. I actually kind of enjoy it.

Hannah McGregor: [00:55:53](#) [Laughs].

Lily Cho: [00:55:53](#) I mean at first my feelings were hurt. I will say that. At first, I was like, "Oh, they think I'm The Man." And my feelings would be hurt. I'd be like "I'm not The Man." And now I'm like, "I am The Man. I really am. And like, the man isn't who you think!"

Hannah McGregor: [00:56:04](#) I think that's what I need to reach. Cause right now I'm feeling this very strong desire to be like, listen, no, I'm like a cool mom [Laughs] but -

Lily Cho: [00:56:11](#) I've got the right kind of Mom jeans [Laughs].

Hannah McGregor: [00:56:16](#) - I recognize I have power, but I have it like, ironically [Laughs]. What does that even mean?

Lily Cho: [00:56:21](#) Oh no. Just take the power. I would say, just take it. Take it unironically and wield it, my friend. I mean, I will say one of my major impetuses for entering admin and for staying in it is that when I first started doing any kind of administrative work — because I saw that, and I'll just be very frank that white men had used the structures to their advantage in such a way that they got lower teaching loads, they got paid more, they got sweeter deals on every front and often those sweeter deals were hidden unless you entered administration and got a look at it. And when I saw it, I was, I, you know, I was upset [Laughs]. And then I thought time to break up this party.

Hannah McGregor: [00:57:07](#) Yeah.

Lily Cho: [00:57:09](#) [Laughs] In all the little ways that we can. But no more. Like, no more. I am not interested anymore in institutional subsidies for a group of people who have been enormously privileged and remain enormously privileged, and then admittedly they're somewhat bewildered at this point in their lives [Laughs] but not my problem! [Laughs]

Hannah McGregor: [00:57:35](#) [Laughs] Oh God. It's so somewhat bewildered. It's your — I mean, it's completely true. Right? Like the realization, even in the — I'm in my fifth year at SFU and the shift between when I first started and was like, I don't care about institutional politics. I don't care about navigating, pay, whatever. I don't care about accessing things. I just want to do work that feels like good work. I want to teach well. I just want to sort of head down and do my job. And then so quickly, I was like, Oh, I'm going to get fucked. Like I, and everybody who comes into this institution thinking I'm just going to try to do a good job is going to get fucked because there is a small group of people who are playing the institution like a fiddle and who are reaping the benefits as a result.

Lily Cho: [00:58:27](#) Oh yes. Every day. Every day my inbox is an example of this pretty much. [Laughs] But now I'm the person— I'm like, no. [Laughs] I mean, I say it much nicer [inaudible] -

Hannah McGregor: [00:58:36](#) [Laughs].

Lily Cho: [00:58:36](#) - but yeah, no, but I think it's really — and I guess the other thing I will say is, I guess it sounds a bit Pollyannaish is that we are one of the last big professional structures where we govern ourselves. So I think a lot about doctors. Doctors used to run hospitals. And then at some point they said, why are we looking at billing and blah, blah, blah when our job is to save lives and heal people. And that gave rise to the hospital administrator

who then makes decisions about how many surgical theaters are open and how hospital resources are distributed. And they don't always align. Those decisions don't always align with what frontline medical people want. And so if we don't do our tours of duty, you know, we don't step up and do these things then we risk having people who actually don't care about these things make those decisions on her behalf. Right. And I don't think we should abdicate at this point. It's not really the time to do that yet. And I think [Laughs] — you know in fact you can do a lot. It feels kind of great. Like I do feel great every time I get to say very quietly and very diplomatically: no. [Laughs] No. That's a crazy thing you're asking for. And, no. [Laughs]

- Hannah McGregor: [00:59:55](#) [Laughs] Ahhh, yeah. I've said, I've said a number of times to early career scholars, graduate students who have said, you know, how do I navigate, like the fact that I want to do this work with the fact that I hate sort of the university as an institution. And I can't, my, my answer is always, if only the people who are comfortable with this institution and the way it works, work in it, then there's gonna be no space for any of the students who aren't, you know, the people the institution was built for in the first place.
- Lily Cho: [01:00:31](#) Absolutely.
- Hannah McGregor: [01:00:31](#) Those of us who are uncomfortable with it need to need to step into it, to try to clear some space because otherwise it's just going to -
- Lily Cho: [01:00:39](#) Can I give you a concrete example?
- Hannah McGregor: [01:00:41](#) - yeah!
- Lily Cho: [01:00:41](#) Of like a kind of war story. I know we're over, it's over, we're going long.
- Hannah McGregor: [01:00:46](#) We really are, but just stop being so interesting.
- Lily Cho: [01:00:49](#) So in my first two days, as chair of my department, I unleashed a maelstrom of patriarchal anger. I don't know how else to put it. So I had a senior colleague who taught two upper level seminars. And I'll just name the topic of the seminars cause they're important for the anecdote. I don't like to name names, but the seminars were about Marshall McLuhan and Northrop Frye and -
- Hannah McGregor: [01:01:16](#) [Laughs] Sorry. Sorry. Give me just one second.

Lily Cho: [01:01:16](#) - I know, I know.

Hannah McGregor: [01:01:21](#) [Laughs] Ok.

Lily Cho: [01:01:21](#) Yep, yep. You're with me. Okay. Yeah. And so, you know, these leadership terms, I begin, I start on July 1 and July 2nd I'm told by the Dean's office, you know, you have to like cut under enrolled courses because you just have to. I mean, there's a longer explanation of why we do that. But so then I go through the list and of course, you know, the McLuhan and Frye courses are desperately under enrolled. They have like respectively two and four students in them or something like that. Right. And so I write to the colleague and I say, you know, dear person, I'm so sorry but your courses desperately under enrolled and we're going to have to cut it. And, you know, because it's so late in the game, the only available teaching assignments are first year courses. So here they are. And you know, call me. I know that you're in a beautiful, far away warm country right now, but [Laughs] I'm available anytime day or night or any time zone you call me and we can talk. And instead of course, what he does — is like the level of outrage was just really astonishing. He wrote endless lengthy letters to the Deans, to president and provost about what an awful, awful person I was. Then he grabbed his McLuhan community, misconstrued the episode to make it sound like I was firing him. Which, I don't know what's happening with that. Or I was canceling these courses forever. And then a change.org petition was launched, which garnered seemingly hundreds of signatures. And then he like wrote to all his former students with a kind of misconstrual of what happened. So then I became the face of the person who was killing CanLit which then unleashed — because when you — the petition the change.org petition had my name on it. If you Google it, you can still find it. It says, Lily Cho bring back English blah blah blah English, blah, blah, blah, blah. And when you do that, when you name a woman of colour and a petition as somebody who's, you know -

Hannah McGregor: [01:03:17](#) Hates noble white men.

Lily Cho: [01:03:19](#) - Exactly. You saw where this was going, you know, that of course then opened up my inbox to a flood of trolling. This was all in the first five days.

Hannah McGregor: [01:03:30](#) Fuck. That's a rough way to start a new position. Wow.

Lily Cho: [01:03:33](#) First I cried. You know, I wasn't really ready for that. But then I also like found a lot of satisfaction and courage in saying you know, you don't get this. Like when we run a course for just two

or three people, that means hundreds of other students don't get to be taught by a full professor. Right. Like that actually is really inequitable. It's inequitable and all kinds of ways. Like so no. Like, no. And I was like, you know, and I was like, I have the data on my side. I didn't randomly pick, you know, it's not like I hate McLuhan and Frye. I have some thoughts [Laughs] like, but what was so interesting was how this person who had had a pretty good gig, you know, all through like teaching these upper level courses and whatnot just couldn't really stand the idea, you know, of someone telling them that they might not get to do this thing that was cushy and easy. Sorry I shouldn't say cushy and easy, but you know, that was, you know, so suited to them.

- Hannah McGregor: [01:04:33](#) That was the thing they wanted to do. Like I remember really vividly being at a sort of curriculum redesign workshop at a former institution where I sessionaled where, you know, the conversation was about redesigning first year English courses. It included all of the sessionals as well as all of the tenure track and tenured faculty. And the full professors were so adamant that they should at no point have to teach a like general enrollment first year English class. That they even, they were like, well can we create a special English class that's for like — people aren't doing honours yet when they're in first year, but can we create a special first year English class that's just for students who think they might be interested in doing an honours in English? And then we can give those to like the more experienced instructors?
- Lily Cho: [01:05:24](#) Which is the code for, I only want to teach the students who are already considered smart.
- Hannah McGregor: [01:05:30](#) Yep.
- Lily Cho: [01:05:30](#) Yeah. And I actually find that infuriating. I'm sorry, like I, you know, as a full time faculty member, like I think like the place in my heart is for these undergraduates who have no idea what they're doing. I'm like give them to me, you know, like they need more than anything to see someone who's a part of the institution who isn't precarious. Like my, my adjunct colleagues are amazing, but are under so much pressure. Right. And I just, so yeah, I think that, you know, these kinds of details, which seem really boring, like who teaches first year, who teaches fourth year, who teaches courses that are routinely under enrolled, so they end up doing significantly less marketing, you know, all those things that actually for me are deeply feminist questions to ask as a person in the institution. And, you know, as an administrator, you can do something about that [Laughs].

And you know, at first you'll cry cause you'll do some things that will probably make people mad. Then you're going to feel really good. That's what I'm going to say. You're going to feel really good. You're going to be like, yeah! [Laughs]

- Hannah McGregor: [01:06:36](#) [Laughs] Oh like I did something. Like I changed something.
- Lily Cho: [01:06:37](#) I did that thing! I recalibrated workload, which is actually a really big deal -
- Hannah McGregor: [01:06:43](#) Yes.
- Lily Cho: [01:06:43](#) - like because why should all the young women colleagues be the people who teach the giant classes? Here we go. Come join the dark side. Come become The Man. [Laughs] [Lily's Theme Music: "Just One of the Guys" by Jenny Lewis].
- Hannah McGregor: [01:07:07](#) If you want to learn more about Lily's work, check out hookandeye.ca or some pertinent links in the show notes. As always, you can find those show notes and the rest of the episodes of *Secret Feminist Agenda* on 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/hashtag/secretfeministagenda). You can also rate and review the show. Thanks so much for the kind and generous new reviews from [ceeceebie2](#), [fraidykat](#) and [Kaykoalabear](#). You're all awesome. 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. Lily's theme song was "One of the Guys" by Jenny Lewis. 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]