

Episode 3.17 On Veganism

February 8, 2019

Hannah (Host): [00:07](#) [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans] Hi I'm Hannah McGregor and this is *Secret Feminist Agenda* and it's like super cold and all of Canada right now. That's a relative super coldness, obviously in Vancouver that means what I left my apartment this morning it was like, five below, which is fine. It's fine. I wore a toque. But also this wasn't the deal when I moved to Vancouver, Vancouver. It's fine, but also it's like minus 4 billion and the rest of the country, all of this is to say I am sending everybody the biggest "make baby cozy" vibes right now. [Laughs] I'm looking at The Weather Network website and the top story is "Man uses blow torch to thaw frozen pipes," comma "sets home on fire." Sorry. I hope that that man and his home are fine, but it's cold in Canada right now, we're burning our houses down. Before we get into the content of this week's minisode, I want to mention a couple of upcoming events. These are all events in Vancouver. I might have some non-Vancouver events coming up as well, but not yet. So let me just tell you about this Vancouver's stuff. Just let me tell you about the Vancouver stuff. Okay. First up on Wednesday, February 27th at 7:00 PM I am hosting an event about my book, *Refuse: CanLit in ruins* at the Vancouver Public Library. It's the downtown location on West Georgia Street. It's going to be me facilitating a conversation with Jessica Johns, Keith Maillard, Shazia Hafiz Ramji, and Erika Thorkelson.. We're going to be talking about CanLit, we're going to be talking about literature and publishing and power. I think it's going to be good, so you should come to that. It's free and the venue is accessible. Next up, I am delighted to say that I am going to be on a panel at the Growing Room Feminist Literary Festival this year. I love Growing Room. It is a festival that happens in Vancouver in March. It's March 8th to 17th this year. I'll be going to a bunch of events. I always go to a bunch of events, but I'm also going to be speaking on a panel. That panel is called "Behind Every Microphone, a Great Woman: Podcasting and Feminism." Obviously super my jam. It's going to be me and Dina del Bucci, who's one half of the team behind the great podcast *Can't Lit*, and Mica Lemiski who hosts *Room Magazine's* podcast, which is called *Fainting Couch Feminists*, and Samantha Nock who is an awesome poet and also the host behind *Heavy Content*, which is a podcast about fatness. The event is on Saturday, March 16th. It runs from 4:30 PM to 6:30 PM. It's at the Red Gate Revue Stage and if you want to know more about it, you can check out, just Google "Growing Room Literary Festival." You'll find it, I believe in you and I'll probably

put a link in the show notes. All right. That's enough plugs for now, so I can now tell you what my secret feminist agenda is this week. [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans]

Hannah (Host):

[03:49](#)

This is a topic that feels, in a lot of ways, a long time coming for me because it's a really central and important part of my life, and my practice as a feminist, and my identity, and at the same time it's something that I have some really fraught feelings about, and that is veganism. That's right. My secret feminist agenda this week is being vegan. But even as I say that, the suggestion, the holding up of veganism as a thing that I think is a model of how other people behave immediately starts making me feel itchy. So let me unpack this for you a little bit. I became a vegan in the fall of 2005, so it's been 13 going on 14 years for me now. It was a context, I'm sure similar to how a lot of other people first dabbled with vegetarianism and veganism. I'd been interested in it before. I tried being vegetarian when I was a teenager, as I'm sure a lot of kids in art schools do. But I took the vegetarian plunge when I started my undergraduate and moved in with, still very dear friend, Jessie. We were roommates for the first two years of my undergrad and, and Jesse was vegetarian and I decided to give it a try again. And this time it stuck. And I have to say that there, there wasn't a ton to that, sort of, early foray into vegetarianism. It was just kind of a thing all my friends were doing. Jessie was also blonde and so I dyed my hair blonde, like, listen, identities are inchoate and flexible and context specific. But what happened over the next two years was that Jessie, again started getting really interested in veganism, explicitly from an animal rights perspective. And so she started bringing a lot of, let's say vegan literatures into our shared home. I was really horrified when Jessie first suggested that she was interested in becoming a vegan. And I was horrified because I had a lot of really strong preconceptions about what vegans were like and that was that they were smug and unbearable. And let me say in retrospect that I don't think I was entirely wrong; I think a lot of vegans are smug and unbearable and I wasn't interested in that. I wasn't interested in an identity that I would lord over other people to make myself seem better than them, but I was interested in the work that Jessie was bringing into our home. I was interested in the kinds of ecological critiques, the kinds of moral critiques, the kinds of feminist critiques that undergirded a lot of her thinking around veganism, and thus increasingly my own thinking around veganism.

Ultimately the tipping point for me was a decreasing sense of the special status of the human; a sort of increasing desire to critique that idea that humans somehow have a natural and

innate right to appropriate resources and life wherever we want to. In that sense, veganism for me was part and parcel with a lot of ideas that I was really encountering and, and coming to terms with including at the same time, feminism and anti-colonial politics. So, you know, I was grappling with whiteness, I was grappling with gender, I was grappling with the human and what it meant, and these ideas together we're making me think in ways that I really hadn't before about how identities are imbued with power and about how identities are imbued with power differentially. And, and the human, the category of the human is really the ultimate example of that. The category of the human is defined via what it is not, and it is defined by violence, which is to say it is defined via what the human is allowed to exert violence over. It's a racialized identity, as well. That is to say that historically, for example, Black and Indigenous people have been excluded from the category of the human and have been associated with the, with the animal, or with the liminal space between the animal and the human. And similarly, women have been expelled from the category of the fully human into the category of the animal. There's a book that, a novel, that I think does a really beautiful job of getting at a lot of this, a lot of how the human establishes itself as a category through violence against women, animals, people of color, queer people, trans people. And that book is Timothy Findley's *Not Wanted on the Voyage*, which is an amazing retelling of the Noah's Ark myth in which, coinciding with the flood and the emergence of a sort of monotheistic religion, is an explicit severing of the ties between the human and the animal. There's this beautiful image of Noah's wife leading a choir of sheep. She loves the way that the sheep sing for her, and once they're on the Ark and have been declared animals, the sheep don't sing anymore. So these were the ideas that I was grappling with at the time, and the ways that those ideas shaped my life and the decisions that I made is really wide ranging. You know, it's informed my scholarship, it's informed my career decisions. It informs my politics on an ongoing basis. And veganism was, was one choice among many that I was making at a time in my life when I was trying to figure out what it might mean to try to disavow or disentangle myself from some of these forms of privilege that I was born into and had been taught to naturalize. And therein I think lies one of the biggest problems with veganism, is the way that for a lot of white people, and for a lot of white women in particular, it goes hand in hand with an attempt to disentangle ourselves from systems of violence.

Hannah (Host):

[10:11](#)

So you can link one version of veganism back to middle class white women's morality in the Victorian era. So the coalescing of middle class identity in the 18th and 19th centuries were

really attached to an idea that the middle class distinguished itself through a particular kind of feeling, a feeling associated with, with sympathy and compassion. And we see that a lot in, you know, forms of sentimentally-driven protest of the period that includes white middle class women's participation in anti-slavery protests, and anti-workhouse protests, and educational and hospital reform. And then, you know, anti-vivisection and animal rights protests emerged as a thing that sensitive white women care about. And I think that that's, that's a big piece of the inheritance that, that someone like me still needs to grapple with when I think about my own veganism. And similarly, I need to grapple with the way that that kind of sentimental politics is not at all a challenge to colonialism, imperialism, and white supremacy, but as actually part of it. It's part of how those systems articulate what white femininity means. It means feeling the right way about the right kinds of things, and it means establishing our, and by our, I mean white women's, moral superiority through particular kinds of emotional response to violence. So we could draw some pretty clear lines, I think, between that kind of Victorian middle class, anti-vivisection protest and Pamela Anderson's outrage over the seal hunt. There's a, there's a similar kind of political work being done in both those cases.

Hannah (Host):

[12:18](#)

Now there's another history to veganism that I have also had to grapple with over the past 14 years. And that is the link between veganism and a culture of food purity, or clean eating, which itself has roots, once again, in white supremacy. And to understand that we need to look at the history of a particular forms of clean eating culture that emerged, particularly around Evangelical Christianity, in the U.S. In the 20th century. And the way that clean eating was associated with, I mean with all kinds of disgust with the body, as well as discussed with things like masturbation, miscegenation with a profound xenophobia. You know, "clean foods" were simple American foods. They were grains that were grown in America. So, so cleanliness and whiteness and Americanness were all articulated against each other. So when we see food being spoken about as "clean," I think we should all immediately grow suspicious of that language. Not only is the notion that some food is clean in some food dirty, an entirely anti-scientific moralizing of different foods, but it also has really charged racial history. And it also points to another challenge of veganism, which is the way that it's linked to restrictive eating and in particular to making certain kinds of foods seem more moral and right than other kinds of foods. You know, I am somebody who, like a lot of other fat people in the world, has struggled a lot with disordered eating in the past, particularly with deeply restrictive

diets. And it is undeniable to me that my commitment to veganism has at times exacerbated that. That because there is this whole category of foods that I have decided are off limits, there was always this part of my brain that is engaged in some form of restriction, or some form of food limitation, or food policing. And these are things I know about veganism. I know these things because as I have made the decision to make it a part of my life, I've also made the decision to make myself really as educated as possible about it to understand its history, to understand its politics, to understand, you know, how it's being practiced, and used, and taken up in the contemporary moment. Now the, the histories of veganism are also not all these kinds of white supremacist, middle class, imperialist histories. There's also strong links between veganism and forms of radical protest culture. You know, the punk movement. My first ever vegan cookbook was Isa Chandra Moskowitz's *Vegan With a Vengeance* and she's still one of my favorite vegan chefs. And she got started making this amazing public cooking show called *Post Punk Kitchen*. And that was a version of veganism that spoke to me so strongly, was this kind of counterculture punk veganism that was about, you know, fuck the man, fuck the system, fuck the status quo, and as part of that also fuck eating meat. And that's the spirit that, that I still think roots a lot of my ongoing commitment to veganism is "fuck the status quo." This is, this is a way in which I choose to not imagine myself as better than or outside of systems, but rather engage in a daily embodied practice based critique of a system that I don't like. And that system is, is factory farming and the way that it practices pretty horrific violence against animals, as well as massive labor exploitation and quite widespread and horrific environmental devastation. And the other thing is that veganism brings me a lot of joy. It's how I learned to cook. It's the kind of food that I learned how to eat. And it brings me a lot of pleasure to make vegan food, to share vegan food with people that I love. But that combination of understanding that it's practice that brings me personally joy and then also understanding all of the larger political implications of it, means that over time I've become less, and less, and less an evangelical kind of vegan and more, and more, and more somebody who understands it as one possible way of doing the kinds of work I'm interested in doing in the world. And, and that brings me to the problem of a lot of contemporary vegans, which is that there is certainly a set of vegans who are self-aggrandizing and self-congratulatory white folks who think that they have stumbled upon the perfect politics of politics, so perfect that it will disentangle us from all other forms of privilege and violence. And that belief manifests itself as white people threatening violence against Indigenous people for, I mean for,

for hunting, for traditional forms of hunting and trapping, but also for, for eating meat in general. And it's a colossal failure of even the most basic intersectional politics to imagine that being a settler and a vegan makes you politically or morally superior to an Indigenous person. I mean the whole notion of political and moral superiority is hierarchical bullshit and should be thrown straight into the garbage can. But also, I mean to understand the way that one of the major projects of colonialism was intervening in and deliberately dismantling Indigenous peoples relationship to the land, and the animals have shared the land with them, and to sustainable forms of living off the land, I mean, it's a historical and it's a profound failure to understand the way that colonialism and food cultures intersect with each other. And I think in general, we all need to do a better job of contextualizing the kinds of political and moral choices that we make and recognizing that the goal is never purity or a freedom from complicity. I mean, I'm sure we all articulate our goals in different ways.

A goal, the goal for me is minimizing harm. That's a really central goal for me is minimizing harm in my life. You know, I've talked about that being part of what informs my practices in the classroom, that I'm thinking of, of a pedagogy that minimizes harm for my students. Veganism for me is another form of minimizing harm and I really respect and admire other people who are also working hard to minimize harm. And I struggle with seeing people engage in harmful behavior, un-self-reflectively, uncritically unthinkingly, but I also see that in myself. Inevitably we all have unthinking an unnoticed ways in which we cause harm. And any choice that you make that you think has purified or cleanses you of that basic fact, I'd be really suspicious of it. I'd be, I'd look really, really closely at, at where you're getting that idea. And it's something that I see in, in vegans quite a lot is, is a notion of purity. There's a history to that link between veganism and purity, and surprise, it has a lot to do with whiteness. At points in the past, the closest I've come to considering giving up veganism has been when I've seen white vegans behaving badly, [laughs] which is all the time. And I think "god, the politics of this movement is so disgusting. I don't want to associate myself with this." But of course isn't there in that a similar kind of instinct to say like, "[Gulp] these white people are being bad, I'll be different from them." It sure turns us right back to that there is no perfect decision to make; there is no right and approved way to be in the world. I think in a best case scenario we're all, sort of, piecing together a toolkit that we can use to try to navigate the complexity of existence. And I think that those toolkits can be things that bring us joy. I really do. And at the end of the day, with all of these histories

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and politics and complexities in mind, just just really, really love vegan donuts. What can I say? All right, let's go hang out with the vegan donut of people. Kaarina, that's your new nickname. [Music: "I Will" by Mitski"]

Kaarina:

[22:07](#)

Hello and welcome to Kaarina's Cozy Self Care Corner. So today your self care corner tip is shamelessly stolen with permission from my good friend Richard. I've been working in my own life on setting attainable goals so that I don't feel like a failure all the time. So instead of saying, "I'm going to work out three times this week," I say "I'm going to work out one time this week." And if I work out that one time, I have achieved my goal and I feel happy and if I work out twice, I've exceeded my goal and I feel happy. As opposed to setting a high goal of three workouts, doing only one workout, and then feeling like a failure. So attainable goals, they're awesome. They build confidence and something else good like, I dunno, successiness. But Richard has improved upon this attainable goal framework. So Richard sets multiple levels of goal for a day. So he gave the example of one day, his C goal is to mark 15 assignments, his B goal was to mark 26, and his A goal was to mark 36. And he says that this makes it easier to be kind to himself because success doesn't have a singular definition. Do you hear that? Success doesn't have a singular definition. You are not successful or not successful because of one single mark that you meet or fail to meet. Success is relative and it's so refreshing to hear that. And I'm so excited to set tiers of goals and maybe use it as a measure of how I'm feeling that week. So if I only meet C goals, that's great and maybe it's a reflection that I need to adjust my expectations of myself. Or if I'm meeting A goals, then I can be like, "damn, I am an A+ successor, succeder, skeletor. So stolen from the mind if the brilliant Richard, who stole it from the mind of a brilliant marathon trainer. There you have it, levels of goals and making yourself feel like the wonderful person you are no matter how productive you are in a given day. Tomorrow, my A level goal is going to be seeing five dogs, my B level goals going to be seeing two dogs and I'm pretty stoked about it. Have a great weekend and they buddy [Music: "I Will" by Mitski"]

Hannah (Host):

[24:43](#)

As always, you can find show notes and the rest of the episodes of *Secret Feminist Agenda* on secretfeministagenda.com. You can follow me on Twitter @hkpmcgregor. You can follow Kaarina @kaarinasaurus. And you can tweet about the podcast using the hashtag #secretfeministagenda. Shoutout to delightful new reviews from Katya the Pig Lover and ConventionalPodcast.com, which I had to look up. It is a podcast about conventions (as in the things that people gathering, not

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like social norms). Anyway, 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. Kaarina's theme song is "I Will" by Mitski. *Secret Feminist Agenda* is 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. [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans]