Episode 3.28 Living a Feminist Life with Sara Ahmed

May 3, 2019

Hannah (Host):	00:00	[Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans] Hi, I'm Hannah McGregor and this is *Secret Feminist Agenda*. And the episode this week is honestly a bit of a dream come true for me. This is one of those dream impossible guests that I reached out to because, you know, "you miss 100% of the shots you don't take," or something. And when she agreed to do an episode, I was so blown away that I told almost no one about it in case it didn't actually happen, but it happened. It's real. It's here, you're about to listen to it. Before you listened to it, let me add one last small plug for the event that I'm doing in Toronto next week on May 7th I am appearing alongside the co, my co-editors for *Refuse: CanLit in Ruins*. So it's going to be me, Julie Rak, and Erin Wunker in conversation with three of the incredible contributors to the book. So Phoebe Wang, Gwen Benaway, and Dorothy Ellen Palmer will also be there. The editors will be interviewing the authors and then there'll be a sort of open Q&A discussion. I think it's going to be a really great event. It's May 7th 6:30 PM to 8:30 PM at the Toronto Reference Library and Beeton Hall. I don't do a lot of events in Toronto, so I hope some of you will come out, come say hi to me, assuming I haven't met you. If I have met you, then also you should come say hi. Both of those apply. All right, We cannot and should not delay any longer, so let's meet Sarah. [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans] Sarah Ahmed is an independent feminist scholar and writer. Her book, *What's the Use?: On the Uses of Use* is forthcoming with Duke University Press in the fall of 2019. Her most recent publications include *Living a Feminist Life, Willful Subjects* and *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life*. [Music: "Thick Skin" by Leona Lewis]
Hannah (Host):	02:46	Okay! Welcome. I want to start off by telling you that a previous guest of this podcast was so thrilled when I told her that you had agreed to come on the podcast, that she asked, as a joke, if she could just like sit in the background while I record it.
Sara:	03:02	[Laughs].
Hannah (Host):	03:02	She's not here. I assure you.
Sara:	03:03	That would've been fine.

Hannah (Host): 03:03 It's just you and me. It's just you, and me, and some cats, and ultimately the listeners. I generally with *Secret Feminist Agenda* episodes have pretty free form conversations, but I actually just finished reading *Living a Feminist Life*, and so I'd like to mostly talk about that book.

Sara: 03:24 Okay.

Hannah (Host): 03:24 And the work that you're doing in that book and maybe a little bit about your new work on complaint and use, which I'm very excited about as well.

Sara: 03:34 Okay.

Hannah (Host): 03:34 So I'd like to start by talking a little bit about the move you made a few years ago into blogging your scholarship and what sort of inspired that shift to starting to write a blog. You talk in the introduction, or maybe even the acknowledgements, of *Living a Feminist Life* about this being your first time writing a book alongside a blog. And I'm really curious about, you know, why you started blogging and how blogging has shifted your writing process.

Sara: 04:04 Yeah, well, I mean I think I was very much aware that feminism is, is something that really can be quite explosive wherever you are. It can really shift and change the horizons through which you live your life. And I've also became more aware, in part I would say, through social media, or just through engaging with different audiences, that the university has these walls that are sometimes quite hard to penetrate. And that finding ways to make connections with other feminists, who weren't necessarily available to me through the university system, was important. I went to this conference, it was called *Reactor: Black Feminist Theory and Activism* [sic]. It was held at a Trafford Rape Crisis Center. And I talked there, for the first time, about killjoys to a non-university based audience and it was just very shifting for me. It, it the connections that I made, the electricity I felt in the room, and being out of engaged outside of the university environment, I, I, I realized that's what I wanted to do more and that I needed to find ways of writing formats that would allow me to have those connections more directly than I'd had in the past. So it was definitely about a desire for connection that wasn't confined by the university, as such. And I was influenced by various people I was engaging with on Facebook at the time to think about a blog is quite a good place where I killed joy to be. Like you could go and do killjoy work, which is sort of calling into question the norms that the assumption or presumption of happiness generates. So you could do that really well in a blog,

		would that with the speed and the directness of a blog. So the idea was always, "oh, let's, let's give killjoys a blog." And that's how I saw the project. It definitely changed my writing to be working in a different format, to be getting much more immediate responses from people who were part of my community, but not necessarily part of the university. And I was writing the blog alongside doing activist work at my university around the problem of sexual harassment and sexual misconduct, and the blog that's acquired the urgency of that project, of having to find a way of addressing a problem here where I was and not somewhere else. And I think as a result, the kind of writing that I was doing did begin to shift somewhat. It wasn't particularly planned or intentional, but the immediacy of the blog combined with the urgency of that project meant that my own writing became looser, less academic.
Hannah (Host):	06:44	Mmhmm.
Sara:	06:44	My sentences started to become less grammatical, which was I've seen not necessarily an ideal from an economics point of view.
Hannah (Host):	06:52	[Laughs].
Sara:	06:52	But seem to be important to express something.
Hannah (Host):	06:56	Yeah.
Sara:	06:56	So it became a very helpful and meaningful widening of my writing.
Hannah (Host):	07:03	Yeah.
Sara:	07:03	To be able to have that blog and it's definitely changed my writing for the writing I now do will always be different because I have that blog.
Hannah (Host):	07:10	Yeah, yeah. Because that voice has become just part of your writerly voice.
Sara:	07:13	Yeah, exactly. Yeah.
Hannah (Host):	07:13	Do you also find sort of between when you start articulating something on the blog and it comes together in the form of a book like, are the ideas getting pushed by the people who are reading it?

Sara:	07:24	Yeah, absolutely. I mean, I think we, we always have a sense of push and pull from the engagements that we are lucky enough to experience as, as feminist intellectuals and activists. And that push and pull happens wherever you are. It happens when you're in a teaching session and a student asks a question that actually unsettles your framework. It happens when you get a comment on your blog that was often, or perhaps a little unexpected. I actually often think that the push and the pull of, of engagement from our wider community, a scholarly community, is often about being interrupted and surprised. And I think because a blog gives you a much more direct line there kind of surprises on the interruptions were, were more palpable and more visceral that they might've been if I was just writing books and sending them out and not knowing what happened to them. Because when you write books, like you don't have a direct relation to your readers unless someone sends you a letter and it takes time, blah, blah, blah. So I think, yeah, I think I, I really do value, but partly because, you know, I did resign from my job during the process of writing *Living a Feminist Life*, and left the university system at one level, that it was just so important to me to actually have another way of accessing feminist ideas. Being part of feminists community that wasn't through the university. I don't think I would've been able to do it to, to make that shift, to have the confidence that I would still be part of a feminist intellectual community if hadn't been for the possibilities enabled by a social media, and blog writing, and all the other kind of ways of liberalizing feminist or feminist knowledge.
Hannah (Host):	09:04	Yeah. Yeah, I do. I think a lot about, the way the walls around the university are. I mean, I think we talk about them, at least in the Canadian postsecondary system as a problem that the university has engaging the public, but it also cuts us off from our audiences, from our communities, from the publics that we actually want to be in dialogue with. So it does, I mean walls work both ways, right?
Sara:	09:28	Yeah, absolutely. Yeah.
Hannah (Host):	09:30	So thinking about, sort of, blogging and how it's impacted your work, I was also thinking about the, the different genres that you're working in in the book itself, which concludes with a toolkit and a manifesto, and is also sort of within the book working with a lot of genres on a, on a granular level. So it feels really aphoristic at time, this sort of bolded sentences that are pulled out. It also works in the anecdote, it feels in that way different from earlier work. I'm thinking of *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, which, which feels sort of, at a textural level,

different. And so I'm curious if you could talk a little bit about playing in those other genres as well: writing a manifesto, writing a like almost a recipe list for a feminist survival toolkit, you know, writing these, these aphorisms where those, those different genres come from or what work they're doing for you.

Sara: 10:27 Yeah, I think you know how we write is such an important question, and I've always learned so much just from talking to other writers about their process and the methods and how you end up finding a writer's voice and making choices about form and genre. And I think it's quite complicated because sometimes retrospectively, it can feel like you made a coherent decision, but at the time you know things happen and writing happens too. Life happens. It all happens all at the same time.

Hannah (Host): 10:57 [Laughs].

Sara: 10:57 And for me like, although *Living a Feminist Life* without question, is a shift, there was a more continuous process of, of, of change from the first book that I did, which was my PhD, basically, Different, Does it Matter. '98 through to, to where I am now. And each book has thought a little bit like loosening, like the loosening of the, the genre with which I was trained, where you know, you have to have an argument, you have a body of references, your, your argument, your references, your skills allow you to do things. But they can also become quite constraining. And I think, you know, we need to learn sometimes the skills, the methods that enable us to participate in an academic community, but we can also sometimes unlearn what we've learned. And that unlearning can often mean loosening and lightening the writing up. And actually I think that they're, the really shift in my writing came when I wrote *Queer Phenomenology*, which was, was the fourth book. And that was odd in a way when you're looking back because that's actually my most, you might say philosophical book in that it's mostly clearly or explicitly located in a philosophical tradition, in phenomenology. But because in that book, what happened in that book is that, you know, I was writing about Husserl's phenomenology and I found the table in Husserl's references. He was referring to the table because the table was the object in front of him. And it made me become very aware and very, very interested in the things that appear in academic work, and what stories they have to tell. And I began to really just begin, I began really to start following the table to the object, rather than following the, you know, the word of the concept through phenomenology. I was following the concept of orientation in that book, that the object itself, the table, which was what was close to hand for herself, caught my attention. And, and

interestingly, that the table did that really shifted the writing. It loosened it up because I began to think about where else tables appear. The family table, the killjoy of course appears at a table. So sometimes you're doing one kind of project and something you encounter can redirect you. And that very much happened in that book. And I actually, spoke about tables in a tape on a tape, in an audio recording. For some reason it became much more about the sound of words and the sound of sentences, and my writing became a little bit more literary as a result of that.

Hannah (Host): 13:23 Mmm.

Sara: 13:23 I became very interested in just what the materiality of the sentences were doing and the, the maybe the, the interest in the materiality of words and the sound of words came from the interest of the materiality of the table. The table led me there. And ever since then when I'd been following words, whether it's the "happiness" or "the will" or "use," it has been the words that have caught my attention, but also the things.

Hannah (Host): 13:45 Mmhmm.

Sara: 13:45 And I think there's, there's been a gradual process of I'm playing around with genre and changing how I relate to my materials as, as a result. So I, although *Living a Feminist Life* did feel very different, in part, as I was writing it alongside a blog and I was writing in a less organized way. Less academically, perhaps you might say, in that I didn't have like the book as it ended up with very different to my starting point, while usually I have this plan and I know exactly what I'm doing, where *Living a Feminist Life* it was a little bit more haphazard. So although there did feel like a shift, it, it also felt like it's part of a longer journey. I think we all have writing journeys and there's all sorts of influences that lead us to write in a certain kind of way in a certain kind of time for a certain kind of audience.

Hannah (Host): 14:31 Yeah. Yeah, I think a lot about the, this process of, of unlearning, which I am in the midst of myself, the unlearning of the academic writing skills that we have, you know, were indoctrinated in or, or let's say really carefully taught in.

Sara: 14:48 Yeah.

Hannah (Host): 14:49 In grad school. And I myself at moments asking what the use of that kind of writing is because it feels like we learn it only to unlearn it again. So do you have a sense of there being value in

that original like, learning those very precise, sort of, rhythms and structures of scholarly pros that so many of our sort of most successful, most engaged academics seem to end up moving away from.

Sara: 15:17 I mean, my, my sense is is that there is value even in acquiring the skills that require narrowing the task. Because in that narrowing, the narrowing of the range of possibilities, you do get a certain kind of depth derived from following a disciplinary path and a set of techniques. And learning those paths and techniques can be quite helpful even if, in the end, one has to unlearn them to do something else. And I think that, I mean I know that, actually having taught a lot in women's studies and in cultural studies that actually starting out from the point of view of interdisciplinarity and lots of different ways of doing the writing, although that can be an, an amazing thing--

Hannah (Host): 16:05 Mmhmm.

Sara: 16:05 --can also bring with it a, the fear and anxiety or having so many different places to go. And at sometimes a narrowing of, of, a very particular set of approaches has, has the use of enabling somebody to acquire the confidence in being able to do something. And, and, and almost like practice something so that it becomes almost habitual. And once something has become almost habitual, you are then freed to do other things. So that's not an argument against disciplinarity. It's just saying that it's interdisciplinarity right from the beginning has challenged us, which tells us that disciplinarity can have benefits, so that what is restrictive is also an that allowing you to do something. But having said that, you know, I was somebody who had a relatively interdisciplinary beginning because I did a humanities degree in Australia. So English and history and philosophy. And I also, when I did do like English, I didn't do major texts or classics. I, I just picked the courses I liked, cuz the English degree. And, and even even in that context, I think students bring their own histories, and their own preferences, and tendencies, and wills to bear on the texts or in the classroom. And I was just never somebody who received ideas very willingly.

Hannah (Host): 17:21 [Laughs].

Sara: 17:21 I was just like, "but, but no, no..."so .

Hannah (Host): 17:24 [Laughs] willful.

Sara:	17:25	So, yeah, exactly. And I, I kind of, I didn't have, you know, a narrow disciplinary training, by any means. And also I didn't, I didn't, I always wanted to do something else of what I was given. So I did do philosophy, but where I was studying, my first degree was analytical philosophy, so I didn't really want to do that. But even when I started reading philosophical texts, primarily on my own or through my department, I didn't acquire the habitus of a philosopher. I never learned to assimilate philosophical ideas well. I kind of always, it always gave me indigestion.
Hannah (Host):	18:01	[Laughs].
Sara:	18:01	So I, you know, I think we can be trained in different ways. A narrower and a broader training they have with them risks, but also benefits. But no matter what we receive as students, what we end up with is always quite different.
Hannah (Host):	18:20	Yeah.
Sara:	18:20	And you know, I think the most important thing is to give people room to work out what kind of writing they want to do. Because working at what kind of writing you want to do is not different from working out what kind of relationship to the world do you want to have. I think they're continuous questions. I don't know if that answered your question actually. [Laughs]
Hannah (Host):	18:38	You absolutely did. You completely did. The way you described disciplinarity really mirrored my own experience. If I also did a a Bachelor of Humanities and didn't start studying English formally until grad school, and very much just never learned how to do the discipline correctly. I know there was a proper way that you were supposed to choose a theorist and turn them into a methodology and then use that to read other books. You're supposed to be like a Foucauldian reader, or a Derridian reader or a, and then use that as the lens you use to read books. But I just could never figure out how to do that right.
Sara:	19:12	Yeah. And sometimes it's good not to be able to figure things out.
Hannah (Host):	19:13	Sometimes it's good not to know how to do things correctly. So, you know, sometimes it's good to be bad. I do, I want, I want to follow through into this conversation about being a willful subject in the university. But just before we leave, the topic of, of writing style, you alluded to this in a previous answer and I, I already had it written down as a question, which is about the

way that your work focuses on words, that so many of your books are these sort of extended meditations that, that take off from particular words. So "killjoy," "willful," "complaint," "use," is the new work. And I'm would love to hear more about what it is about a particular word that grabs you, like why you're interested in working at a level of the word like that, but also how it comes that one word becomes the word that you are working with.

Sara: 20:07 Yeah, I mean that's, that's a good question. And sometimes it's hard to go backwards to work out what led you somewhere.

Hannah (Host): 20:15 Mmhmm!

Sara: 20:15 And I, I've always really loved language, I suppose I would say my aunt, who I talk about in the beginning of *Living a Feminist Life* was a poet. My favorite theorists are poets, like Audre Lorde. So that interest in language as part of what animates me anyway. I mean I have that as a kind of human interest, as opposed to just a scholarly one. And like, I spent half my life in an etymology dictionary. I've just been fascinated always by, well not always. That's like obviously not quite true--

Hannah (Host): 20:43 [Laughs].

Sara: 20:43 --but as long as I can remember I'd been fascinated by the mutations of words, how they acquire different meanings. Like I remember when I first looked up "happiness" and I didn't know that it came from the English word "hap" meaning chance.

Hannah (Host): 20:56 Yeah.

Sara: 20:57 And that just became such an interesting thing, like happiness now is so often defined against happenstance or, what I think of as "the hap." It's what you earn. It's what you, what you deserve for living your life in the right way. And the question that came was "how did 'happiness' lose its 'hap'?" But of course to get to that question, "how did 'happiness' lose its 'hap'?" I had to first become interested in the word happiness and I had to first become interested in the in words themselves. And I think part of the interest in mutation of language, part of that interest is just about if you follow the words, where do you go? And although my starting point was quite literary and I'm a literary trained scholar by training, I was sort of became very interested in how words travel and how they acquire meaning and value. And that was very much part of my early work on affect, was

like how words become sticky. I used to think of it as like Velcro, what the word goes near sticks to it.

Hannah (Host): 21:56 Mmm.

Sara: 21:56 And so I became very interested in trying to explain the stickiness of language or how in the context of racist hate speech, like a word can be used in such a way as to imply that the proximity between it and something is inherent. So a politician might say, "this is not a war against Islam," and then use the figure "Islamic terrorist" as if the proximity between "Islam" and "terror" was more than simply temporal. And so there was an interest there early on in the mechanisms that allow words to acquire and hold onto meaning. And a lot of the words that I became interested in where we're holders, the word "queer," like as we all know, I mean it travels partly by holding onto the baggage, the negation, the insult be transformed into a tool. The transformation of "queer" from insult into complaint. That, that mechanism, that politics, that gesture has always fascinated me. So which word I happen to follow at which time, I mean there's all sorts of influences that. But I have found that, at least in my work that there's always something that brings me to it. With the word "happiness" would be one example where partly it was about the, the research I've been doing earlier. So the research on diversity, which involved asking practitioners about how they use the language of diversity became very much a sort of research project that looked at what diversity was doing as a way of creating the impression of institutional happiness. So immediately in asking what diversity is doing, it led me to thinking about what happiness is doing as a way often of screening out ongoing relations of violence and inequality. But the other influence was watching the film "Bend it Like Beckham, which you know, I'm very interested in and I really like, but it's also really annoying for the happiness of it's ending, which is so much premised on the act of letting go of the experience or the memory of the violence of racism through proximity to the white man through playing the game. So here happiness seemed to be this kind of like forward agentic thing that requires you to give up memories of pain, of racism. So watching a movie, doing a research project, these were where happiness as a word, as a concept of a thing that was doing something came to me as something that demanded my attention.

Hannah (Host): 24:08 Mmhmm.

Sara:	24:08	And then you follow that word, and of course when you follow that word you don't know what you're going to find.
Hannah (Host):	24:12	Yeah.
Sara:	24:12	I certainly found how often with happiness comes will and that that's part of the philosophical tradition, philosophical history, but it was also in the materials. So often the one who was a killjoy, who gets in the way of being happy, was also and sort of being willful as, as, as a problem because of their will. So unhappiness and willing wrong, we're very, very sat together. So from "happiness" to "will," and then from "will" to "use." Each word brings with it materials that then lead me to other words and it's a bit, it's a bit like that. It's a very organic process at one level. But yeah, things jump out at you and once they've caught your attention, it's hard to let them go. Problem is of course you see them everywhere.
Hannah (Host):	24:57	Yeah.
Sara:	24:57	And you know, you have to be careful that you don't presume that the word falls around the word that you have chosen.
Hannah (Host):	25:02	Mmm.
Sara:	25:02	But that you recognize the limits or where you can go if you're following this word. Because following this word doesn't mean going everywhere. Even if the word feels like it's going everywhere sometimes.
Hannah (Host):	25:12	Oh, and it can feel like that, right? When you're right in the midst of something and all of a sudden everything looks like it's reflecting back to you the new point of interest.
Sara:	25:20	Yes, exactly. We've all been there. We know what that's like.
Hannah (Host):	25:24	[Laughs] But there is a beautiful, I mean speaking of happenstance, that beautiful way that when you started paying attention to things that a particular way, you're reading starts leading you there or, you know, it just illuminates different pieces of of texts. I started paying attention to, for a keynote I was writing a couple of months ago, just started paying attention to care. I was just thinking about care in the context of this podcast because we talk a lot about self care and care just started, you know, it just started popping up everywhere. I was just noticing it and all of the texts. And even if it's not

everything, the sort of the noticing becomes a big part of figuring out how you want to work with a term. Yeah

Sara: 26:06 Yeah. Sometimes it takes time sometimes to even notice what is actually already there--

Hannah (Host): 26:12 Mmhmm.

Sara: 26:12 --In the materials that are close to hand. I know when I did my diversity project that I got turned into the book On Being Included, I had a data set that I sat with for quite a while because the difficulties on that project. And when I came back to them, the interviews, transcripts, I'm like, "oh my gosh, there's so many walls in the material." Walls, brick walls, things that you can't put gates despite being appointed as a diversity practitioner, the institution becomes this wall that stops you. I hadn't realized that as I was doing interviews, but it took a bit of time for the walls to hit me.

Hannah (Host): 26:43 Yeah.

Sara: 26:43 Once they hit me, I began to realize they were doing something.

Hannah (Host): 26:46 Mmhmm, yeah.

Sara: 26:46 --in the data because they were doing something in the world and that I learnt a lot from how to, how long it can take to notice what's right in front of you. And always then to see that the material that you have, that's the path, that that gives you the pathways. I know that with the project on, on will and willfulness, because I was following the figure of the willful child, I came to the Grimm story, “The Willful Child,” which I hadn't read before. And in that story is this image of the arm that keeps coming up. And then once I, once I caught my attention, then I began noticing not only arms, but all sorts of willful, and wayward, and wandering body parts across the materials I was reading. And their arms follow me through into the use project.

Hannah (Host): 27:26 Mmhmm.

Sara: 27:27 Immediately I began to read about the ways in which different intellectual histories have dealt with the concept of use or made use into a concept. I noticed that there was a lot of reference to the blacksmith's arm. The blacksmith's strong arm, because the blacksmith's arm was used to exemplify principles of the French biologist Lamarck, that if you use something, it becomes

stronger. And yet in Lamarck there is no reference to blacksmith's arm, so this blacksmith's arm really caught my attention--

Hannah (Host): 27:53 Yeah.

Sara: 27:53 --because it was kind of missing from Lamarck, but everywhere, everywhere present to exemplify Lamarckian principles. But I wouldn't have noticed the arm was missing or that the arm was doing this work if I hadn't already been engaged by the arm in the willful story of “The Willful Child.” So I think it's really important to say that because otherwise it can feel like you have a word and a concept and you're following it and you know where you're going.

Sara: 28:16 Mmhmm.

Sara: 28:16 But if following a word or a concept or a thing, however you choose to define what it is that you're doing, you encounter materials because you're doing that work, but the materials come back to you and they are very, redirective and that that's the joy of the search for me. When you find something that actually flips around, flips flips your mind that the totally, totally takes you somewhere else.

Hannah (Host): 28:37 Yeah.

Sara: 28:37 And that's what a research actually is about. I think

Hannah (Host): 28:40 It also suggests something of the way that these texts that we feel like we are so familiar with, we feel like we know what's in them, but you come back to them looking differently and all of a sudden they're different.

Sara: 28:52 Yeah.

Hannah (Host): 28:52 Like it's a remarkable experience. That sort of rereading or revisiting, especially when you think you know what's in there. Like you think you know that there's a particular sentence or a particular image in a text because, you know, that's the way it circulates and then you go back to it and find that it's missing is always a, a remarkable moment.

Sara: 29:12 Yeah, absolutely.

Hannah (Host): 29:12 So let's talk a little bit about the university and leaving the university. A lot of *Secret Feminist Agenda*, because it is, I mean

much in the way you described sort of in *Living a Feminist Life*, it's trying to do a feminist project that speaks to people outside of the university, but this is where I'm situated and so it's where I'm speaking from. And so a lot of the time when I think about the, sort of, coercive force of institutions, it's the university that I think about. And we talk in particular about whether or not it is possible to do radical work from within the institution, because the particular shape of the university, again, the system that I know, which is the Canadian one, is that it seems to have this endless capacity to absorb, critique and render that critique part of the university's own mission. So that being present, and this is, this is, I'm thinking of Moten and Harney here like that, that when you are critical within the university, you are serving the university's mission, which is to be critical.

Sara: 30:11 Mmhmm.

Hannah (Host): 30:11 And I've been thinking, you know, also alongside Moten and Harney about the idea of the undercommons, and the idea of the undercommons as perhaps not available to everyone. You know, like the undercommons is an articulation of what it means to be a Black scholar in the university and can't be, I think easily universalized as like every edgy thinker in this institution, cuz that, once again, becomes another kind of absorption. So I wonder if you could talk a little bit first about that decision to leave the university, and what it looks like for you now doing what you, at some point, I think maybe in the bio on your website you refer to working on the university even though you no longer work at it. And so that shift, what may be about the university reveals itself differently to you now that you are working on it but not at it.

Sara: 31:04 Yeah, I mean, I think I, I mean I would, I would say that it's very important, like any, any term, any space that we imagine undercommons or otherwise is, as you've implied in your remarks, appropriable. And criticality would definitely be one of those cases in point. I mean, I call it critical racism, the racism reproduced by those who think of themselves as critical. The problem there is that it was assumed by virtue of having an orientation that you can transcend the position from which you're speaking. And that I think a real starting point for any of us, whatever work we do, however we're situated bodies out of place or not, is our own complicity in, in the systems that we are trying not to reproduce. And I see their complicity, I learned a lot about competitive on talking to diversity practitioners. In the British context, diversity practitioners are all pretty much always administrators. So they're employed by human resources. And a lot of academics, I've learned, in the British context tend to

think of their administrators as being kind of like the handy people, and you know, academics are the heads and they're the hands. And to see the administrators as neoliberal agents or as being simply about reproducing the logics at the university, the academics are critiquing, and I really reject that. I actually, I've actually found very much that talking and working with diversity practitioners who are often administrators, who were actually given the task of instrumentalizing and institutionalizing commitments to diversity, it's taught me about where political change happens.

Hannah (Host): 32:38 Mmm.

Sara: 32:38 And it often doesn't happen in the radical intellectuals writing books about, you know, their radical intellectual ideas.

Hannah (Host): 32:44 [Laughs].

Sara: 32:44 It happens on people who are doing the handiwork, who were actually working with what seems to be what Audre Lorde might have called "the master's tools," but they're trying to use those tools to do something other than keep the house in its existing shape. So it's often in the housework, I think about as housework, people who appear to be at one level, having no room for critique, who are actually giving us, or could share with us the most important data on the university. And that's where I've learned so much from actually just listening to people who were given that task of diversifying the institution. And that is often about listening to how I've called it the nonperformative, how things don't bring into effect what they name. Diversity policies that are brought into existence without coming into use.

Hannah (Host): 33:33 Mmhmm.

Sara: 33:33 It's listening, they're not informed of came from listening to practitioners talk about what it feels like to have the university take up the work they do whilst neutralizing that work with so many consequences. So I, I say that partly coming out of a university that, that you had a lot of investment of being critical and where equality and diversity was seen as audit, and bureaucratic, and things that were about keeping the machine going. It's really important to me to say that the people given the task of keeping the machine going are often those who know about the machine. So yes, I think when you're involved in the complaint, when you're involved in the project of bringing to attention really deep rooted relations of abuse and harassment you certainly learn about that machine too. A lot of

what you're doing when you're making complaints happens behind closed doors.

Hannah (Host): 34:27 Mmhmm.

Sara: 34:27 A complaint as soon as it's made is made confidential. There's a lot of secrecy, there's a lot of containment.

Hannah (Host): 34:33 Yeah.

Sara: 34:33 Suppression means to keep something secret as well as to contain. And complaint also, I call it "institutional machinery." Complaints teach about institutional machinery and you come to know so much about what the institution does not want to reveal. And I mean, there came to be a certain point where I kind of like, knew too much about the institution I was working at and I simply just could not stay working anymore without feeling that, in the end, I would have to become complicit with the very mechanisms that were silencing that was stopping the information about the harassment and abuse and bullying from getting out.

Hannah (Host): 35:10 Mmhmm.

Sara: 35:10 So in order to get the information out, I had to get out. I mean it was as simple as that. I mean some people would call it "becoming a whistleblower;" it certainly didn't feel it as intentional or deliberate as that. So it was just a certain point and I'm like, "I can't do this anymore," because you cut up against the very structures that the complaints are trying to address.

Hannah (Host): 35:27 Yeah.

Sara: 35:27 But because you're trying to address them, you come up against them even more. And that's one of the things I've learned since we're doing the project Ion complaint is that if you point out harassment, if you even use the language of harassment, you'll be harassed or the more. And you try create room and you'll end up with less rooms. So it didn't actually feel like I made this, sort of, deliberate choice to leave the university. It felt like like, "I'm doing this work." I can't. You get stuck in the very dynamics who are trying to, to challenge and there's a certain point you reach where you just, you just don't do it anymore.

Hannah (Host): 35:58 Yeah.

Sara:	35:59	And obviously in my case I had, I had options. I was already, thinking of myself as a feminist writer as much as, as a, as an academic.
Hannah (Host):	36:07	Mmhmm.
Sara:	36:07	I knew I would be able to take some time out because my partner's an academic and has a salary. I had the privileges of being able to withdraw without getting another job straight away. But it was, this was not a happy story. This was actually a, a very traumatic experience of really coming up against--
Hannah (Host):	36:22	Yeah.
Sara:	36:22	--the violence of an institution that is committed to not knowing or revealing or dealing with the violence in the institution. But even unhappy stories can give you options.
Hannah (Host):	36:34	Mmhmm.
Sara:	36:35	And one of the things I really wanted to do was, you know, I learnt so much from the way in which once you begin to say, "I will, I will listen to you," people who have a complaint to make will find you. And I wanted to continue to do the work supporting those who are trying to bring their complaints to the world in other ways. And that, that's why I chose to say working on the university, while no longer working at it.
Hannah (Host):	37:00	Yeah, yeah. And do you feel or find that you can speak differently about, you know, the stories that people are bringing you or what you observed there now that you're not in the institution in the same way?
Sara:	37:12	I think it probably is true. I mean I, I think it's very important that my own complaint story was part of the starting point.
Hannah (Host):	37:19	Mmhmm.
Sara:	37:20	I've, I primarily relied on people finding me.
Hannah (Host):	37:24	Yeah.
Sara:	37:24	So I haven't like gone out looking for research participants. So that I resigned and that, especially saying "no," my "no," "no" to this was public enough meant that people could find me.
Hannah (Host):	37:37	Yeah.

Sara:	37:37	And that's kind of a finding that complaints help us to find each other. So I think my own complaint experience, which I think was also shaped by the work I'd done already on racism and diversity, I had a real understanding of how some of these institutional processes worked, I think has certainly allowed me to kind of hear--
Hannah (Host):	37:56	Mmhmm.
Sara:	37:56	--hear what's going on in the complaints that I'm listening to. But I think the really big difference that being not at a university makes, is more to those who are speaking to me.
Hannah (Host):	38:06	Yeah.
Sara:	38:06	I think it really matters to people that I'm not located in an institution that, that in a way it kind of like I'm, there were such project's that not funded, it's not going to, you know, be subject to the normal rules that, in a way, can sometimes constrain academic knowledge. It's a kind of like if they're really traumatic or violent experiences happen in the institution, the sense that the person who's receiving your complaint isn't there anymore, I think has made people feel more comfortable in sharing some of this material. Most of them who I've spoken to, I mean I, it's complicated. I'm mainly doing interviews by Skype. I don't have funding.
Hannah (Host):	38:45	Mmhmm.
Sara:	38:45	I know what it's like to have to keep repeating a very difficult and painful story.
Hannah (Host):	38:51	Yeah.
Sara:	38:51	But a lot of people have said to me, one of the main reasons I want to share the story is so that the complaint has somewhere to go.
Hannah (Host):	38:58	Yeah.
Sara:	38:58	Because so often when we do complain we get stuck and it, and you can feel like you have all of this material, all these stories to tell and the story just sits with you.
Hannah (Host):	39:07	Yeah.

Sara:	39:07	And you become this like, I think of it as you become a filing cabinet. You know, you're stuffed full of all this material. So I'm kinda like, I'm a way for the files to get out for the, for what stuff to be, to be shared. And I take that as a really big responsibility that I have, cuz I'm incredibly privileged to be the one who's holding and sharing some of the stories that had been shared with me because they are incredibly powerful testimony.
Hannah (Host):	39:31	What you said about people finding each other through complaint. When I first arrived in Vancouver, I've been here for two and a half years. When I first arrived in Vancouver, maybe two months after I arrived, there was this, sort of, institutional explosion of sorts at UBC, which is not the university I'm at, but the other larger university in the city, that involved the head of the creative writing program had been fired for a number of complaints made against him by students--
Sara:	39:59	Yeah.
Hannah (Host):	39:59	Including, I don't know if the story ever made its way to you, but--
Sara:	40:02	Yeah. No, no, I, I, I know what you're talking about.
Hannah (Host):	40:05	And I didn't, at the time I knew none of the people involved in it. I just knew that shortly after I arrived, about 80 of the most powerful writers in Canada signed to this open letter in support of the fire to professor saying, you know, essentially, I mean, we're familiar with these open letters, right? We know how they work the way that they erase the experience of the complainants. And so with the experience of the university that I had, I read this letter, I didn't know any of the people involved and I said, "well, that reads to me like bullshit," because I know how power works in universities and I know how hard it is to be heard. And I default to believing students when they [laughs] talk about what's happened to them. And so I started complaining about this letter a lot publicly, and the majority of the community that I have in Vancouver now is a community that I found through complaint, through being somebody who is like new in this community, but it's like, "well, I'm mad about this." Then other people who were also mad we're like, "oh yeah, me too."
Sara:	41:09	Yeah.

Hannah (Host):	41:09	Yeah. Just being a a public angry pain in the ass can really help you find your people.
Sara:	41:15	Yeah, no it absolutely can. And I think in a way a lot of, a lot of feminist history is about that. I mean people, when they think about consciousness raising, maybe you think about that as sort of speaking to each other in a room, but in a way what it is is about saying, "I can begin to participate in this anger, this refusal of how ideas are ordinarily received by doing that with others." And it's a kind of like, that sideways connection between the, the people who are articulating their anger, that sideways connection, the way in which information can travel down that line. It's been very, very important to the history of feminists communities of all kinds. And I think one of the things that I would say as well, is that most of the time, most complaints don't become public.
Hannah (Host):	41:56	Yeah.
Sara:	41:56	I mean they really don't. So there's a lot of press at the moment in the UK about nondisclosure agreements and they're a big problem. The way in which all or most complaints get settled by people signing up to withhold information in return for receiving something from the institution.
Hannah (Host):	42:13	Mmhmm.
Sara:	42:13	But the silencing starts right from the beginning. As soon as complaints are made, they're made confidential. So a lot of complaints that I, you know, I think about that, that, that file, that filing cabinet is a kind of institutional closet. And I think about all the things that are buried there, and by things I ought to include, you know, experiences, and records, and documents, but also people.
Hannah (Host):	42:35	Yeah.
Sara:	42:35	Like there's a kind of like institutional burial. And so finding out other three complaints is willingly had when there's no official record.
Hannah (Host):	42:45	Yeah.
Sara:	42:45	And so one of the things that's been really, really interesting to me is that when you do make a complaint, often what happens, that even though there's not an official record, even though a lot of that material is held in cabinets and closets of different

kinds, that through often informal means of communication, people do come to hear, "oh actually somebody had tried to complain before." They find out. So that even these, these, these, these complaints that don't leave a trace in the official records, leave a trace somewhere. It might be in someone's memory or it might be in a story that has been shared over time. And that's been what's really, really interesting to me in addition to the kind of way in which complaint publicly helps us to find quote unquote "our people."

Hannah (Host): 43:24 Mmhmm.

Sara: 43:24 Complaints, despite not being public, can still give us a connection to these histories that haven't left a trace but are there all the more--

Hannah (Host): 43:35 Yeah.

Sara: 43:35 --in what hasn't been dealt with. And one of the people that communicated with me by, by written testimony talked about the complaints going into a "complaint graveyard." And I think, you know, I think it's really, really interesting to think about the ghostly function, the haunting, you know, the, the task in a way or the institution, it seems to reproduce itself. It has to contain the complainer, but that fails.

Hannah (Host): 43:59 Yeah.

Sara: 43:59 And that's where a feminist community of any other kinds of anti-racist, queer communities often come from, their failure of the, of the institutions to contain the complaints--

Hannah (Host): 44:09 Yeah.

Sara: 44:09 --which actually bear witness to the violence of the institution so intent on reproducing itself.

Hannah (Host): 44:15 And then there becomes a way in which we may be or are able or ready to see the those ghosts, to see those unwritten histories. I mean just that basic like, "I believe you." Well, why do I believe you? I believe because I have also not been believed.

Sara: 44:31 Yeah, yeah. And it's a very important statement because I mean, I mean I mentioned that how I learnt to notice the walls in my data on diversity work. And I think that has helped me to really hear that the, the, the complaint data, I think I've interviewed

now I'm 38 people and I will be probably 40, 41 by the time I finished, but I've also spoken to many more people informally--

Hannah (Host): 44:54 Mmhmm.

Sara: 44:54 --is how often people talk about doors. The complaints happen behind closed doors, but also the shutting of doors on the complaint. The different techniques and technologies for stopping, not just the complaint from getting through the institution, but stopping the person who carries the complaint, because we carry our complaints whether or not we make them. And one of the primary ways in which complaints are stopped is through perception, that rendering the complainant unincredible, disbelief in, in, in what she has to say. So the, the role of these presumptions of fraudulents as a kind of door that gets closed. So it's so important that the statement "I believe you" is an opening of a door. It's a such an important political act and that is what allows the complaints to come through. And then people think, "well why is there so many?" There's so many because those doors had been so tightly closed, it takes a huge amount. It takes a whole political movement to open a door. And I think we learn a lot from that.

Hannah (Host): 45:53 Okay. I'm going to ask you one last question, cuz I am, I'm cognizant of the time and I'm also, I'm watching how much recording we have and thinking about the fact that I'm cutting nothing out, because everything you're saying is solid gold.

Sara: 46:05 [Laughs].

Hannah (Host): 46:05 Okay. So as I was reading *Living a Feminist Life*, I was thinking about the moment of "snap" and I was thinking about your inclusion of time, specifically of taking time out in your killjoys survival kit. And thinking about the incredible difficulty of the work around diversity that you're talking about holding these stories. And also, even just as I'm sort of thinking out loud right now, the way that the book as a whole charts a life in feminism, which is about sustainability and longevity. And so I'm wondering if you could speak a little bit about sustaining feminism, about what it looks like to do this kind of work, which is so often wearing over a lifetime.

Sara: 46:55 Yeah, I mean I think that is such an important question. And when I first conceived at the book, I didn't have a survival kit or a manifesto in my conclusion. That came halfway through. Also, and it is quite interesting, it was, it began much more just a series of different concepts. And I was going to have chapters, I don't know what I was thinking.

Hannah (Host):	47:14	[Laughs].
Sara:	47:14	But I eventually realized that actually, you know, the question of living a feminist life, it's a very practical question of how to go on, how to survive in the full sense of retaining one's projects when the world you come up against can often feel that it takes so much energy from you to keep going to keep those projects going. And I think I have a double expression in the survival toolkit that feminism needs feminists survive and feminist and feminism to survive.
Hannah (Host):	47:45	Yeah.
Sara:	47:45	And I think both of those really matter, that for me living a feminist life part, part of what's makes that possible is the way in which through living that life you do find other feminists.
Hannah (Host):	47:56	Yeah.
Sara:	47:56	Just as you were talking about that you find those that also say no to the forms of violence, that being a feminist is partly about identifying and wishing to stop. Let's just use that word. We will stop it. We want to stop the violence from happening. And for me, being a feminist, finding feminism is also finding the resources to make, help me make sense of how it is that that violence, despite so much political world and energy and effort keeps on going on. But you know, at the same time, even if feminism, you know, becomes the resource, our life resource, it can still feel diminishing because you know, the more knowledge you have, the more understanding you have, the more you have a sense of just how much you come up against. And each time you're up against one of those walls where you're stopped because of how you're perceived from being, or you're stopped because of what you're trying to do, each time you can feel just like that much more wearing and that much more tearing. And I think I've learned from the many feminists about what to do about that problem when the world you come up against makes it harder to persist with one's feminist projects. But obviously we're not, obviously for me, Audre Lorde's Cancer Journals, a incredible book and burst of light, where she's very talking about survival for her somebody living with breast cancer, as a Black woman living in a racist world, as a lesbian, as a, as a mother, as poet, as a warrior. She really gives me insights and what you have to do to make your survival part of your politics.
Hannah (Host):	49:29	Mmhmm.

Sara:	49:29	And one of the things that's really interesting in I was rereading "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House" recently, partly for a book launch of a book that was co-edited by Jason Arday and Heidi Mirza called *Dismantling Race.* So one of the things that's really striking to me, going back to that essay, was this is a project, this is a project from Lorde's point of view about dismantling, you know?
Hannah (Host):	49:50	Mmhmm.
Sara:	49:50	And she, you know, she just turns up that the 30th anniversary of Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex* and she finds that the only panel in which Black feminists are speaking is the panel sheet speaking on.
Hannah (Host):	49:59	Mmhmm.
Sara:	49:59	You know, and she was, she's like, "these are the master's tools." This is the way in which the same house ends up being assembled, using the same doors, stopping the same people from entering. And in that essay, which is about not becoming the master's tool, let's put it like that.
Hannah (Host):	50:16	Mmhmm.
Sara:	50:16	She also talks about survival. She says, you know, for poor women, for migrant women, for lesbians survival is not an academic skill.
Hannah (Host):	50:25	Mmhmm.
Sara:	50:25	You know, it's something that you know about because it's what you're doing in order to get anywhere, in order to be anywhere. And I think that that really got me thinking again about what she's implying there, that actually the project of trying to not reproduce that world, same old, same old is a project of opening up the room for some to be in the world. And that these things are inseparable. So the question of survival, of being able to persist with one's projects, with one's body, with one's history, I think of it as probably the most intellectual philosophical, feminist question that there is, and undoubtedly also a practical question. And I do think that thinking then about how much time you have, and she was too, talked a lot about feeling the diagnosis in her bones in bursts of light. So she sensed that she had that their time is what she doesn't have much of. That, that, that sense of the finitude of being that she's going to live until she's no longer living. And I think what I

really wanted to try and convey in just not just not following Audre Lorde, if that's too ambitious for me to describe my own work in that way, but just I think of it as becoming a footnote toward, you know. [Laughs]

Hannah (Host): 51:43 [Laughs].

Sara: 51:43 It's just, it's just having a sense of, okay, well this is the, the finitude. There's only so much I can do. There's only so much time that I have, what do I need to do to enable me to hold onto my commitments? And I think, you know, we've projects like "diversity" and "complaint", I've really become very aware of how important it is that you can be easily shattered by the histories that you hold in a body. There is only so much you can take in and there's only so much that you can take on. So it's very, very important to think of enabling oneself to do what one can by letting oneself not do things, passing your refusal onto others. If you cannot hold on, you pass it on. And that is also another way of thinking about feminist inheritance and, and, and feminist survival is thinking about the work of passing it on and giving oneself time out to live.

Hannah (Host): 52:39 Yeah.

Sara: 52:39 I mean, I think, I always remember watching the film, I think it's *The Berlin Years* with Audre, and she was, when she was in Berlin and she's not well. She's not well in that scene. But they're, they're eating, I think that eating is it beetroot? And it's a scene of these, these incredible women, mainly Black women, together eating this beetroot. And it's just, it's just the absolute delight in the ordinary joys of nourishment, and the collectivity of that thing, that like [unclear] become so much about what we do to nourish each other, to sustain each other. And it was a, it was such a, a beautiful scene. Not In any romanticizing way, you know, life can be shitty even in these spaces [laughs].

Hannah (Host): 53:25 [Laughs] Yeah.

Sara: 53:25 But just because it was like the, the care and the attention to eating this delightful thing well and together. And I think for me our survival and our own survival is about taking the time out from always feeling that we have to fight. And part of taking that time out from fighting, is also what we can take, what we can digest and how we do that the best we can.

Hannah (Host): 53:51 Wonderful. Thank you so much.

Sara:	53:53	I think it was, I think it was beetroot, now I'm just...[Laughs]
Hannah (Host):	53:56	[Laughs] I'll, I'll fact check it. That's why I haven't, I haven't watched it, but that evoked so much for me. The, I have read, Audre Lorde's *Cancer Journals*. My mother died of cancer when I was 16 and so a lot of those sort of formative years for me were, were sort of, you know, the major feminist figure in my life was also dying. And there's a, a part in the survival kit where you talk about dancing.
Sara:	54:25	Yes.
Hannah (Host):	54:25	And I have these vivid memories of dancing with her and she had an oxygen, oxygen tube in her nose and could only stand for a couple of minutes at a time, but would still get up to dance. And that you know that like the world can wear you down, but to still find those moments or those possibilities of that kind of embodied pleasure, I think really is, even in the midst of death, I think really is a way of surviving.
Sara:	54:50	Yeah.
Hannah (Host):	54:50	Thank you so much. [Music: Thick Skin" by Leona Lewis]
Sara:	55:14	If you want to learn more about Sarah Ahmed. You can follow her on Twitter at Sarah and Ahmed or check out her website at Sarah n Ahmed that's s a r a n a h m e d.com and you can also find her blog at feministkilljoys.com. You can find all of those links and show notes and all of the episodes of *Secret Feminist Agenda* on secretfeministagenda.com. You can follow me on Twitter @hkpmcgregor and you can tweet about the podcast using the hashtag #secretfeministagenda. And you can and should review the show. There are two new reviews coming in from Canada this week. One from Hannah Bales and the other from The Mstack, assuming that's how either of those are pronounced. Thank you both so much. The podcast theme song is “Mesh Shirt” by Mom Jeans off their album Chub Rub, and you can download the entire album on freemusicarchive.org or follow them on Facebook. Sarah's theme song was "Thick Skin" by Leona Lewis. *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]